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SANS MERCI;

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KESTRELS AND FALCONS.

BY THE AUTHOR OF

“GUY LIVINGSTONE,” “SWORD AND GOWN,”
ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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SANS MERCI;

OR,

KESTRELS AND FALCONS.

CHAPTER I.

TORRCASTER.

THE expert, in matters architectural or ecclesiastical, will easily point out to you some difference, marked and material, in the aspect of each and every one of English cathedral towns. But, to the uninitiated observer, a weary monotony of colouring seems to pervade them all. It is well with us, while we stand in the shadow of the huge western towers, or of the soaring minster-spire when the sun is low. Setting aside all reverence—the very sense of seclusion and severance from the buzzing world outside must needs be pleasant, while it lasts ; mind and body alike,

are content to rest for awhile in the midst of peace, that is not of our time.

It seems to me that the *Rellgio Loci* may subsist wholly independently of creed ; it may prevail in any spot, girdled by the grandeur of ancient stones, where multitudes have worshipped in singleness and sincerity of heart—however false or mistaken their faith—till it needs an antiquarian's eye, to trace among ruins the outlines of a place of prayer. Only, to the building, whatsoever it may be, there must attach the grave dignity of age ; there must be wealth of shade, not less than of light, within its precincts ; eccentricities of architectural bad taste are scarcely more fatal, than the glitter and glare of novelty. Devotion has so little to do with the feeling of which I speak, that the sternest Puritan—an iconoclast in intent—might be subjected to it unconsciously, under the portico of St. Peter's, whilst testifying fiercely in his heart against all the abominations of the Seven Hills, past, present, and to come : it might steal over a missionary to the Moslem, whilst resting in the

shadow of an eastern mosque: I myself have felt it—leaning against the fragments of an altar whereon no fire has been laid since the death of Pan. But, most pious of all possible readers! I defy you to feel it, if you gaze, till your eyes are dim, on the last new conventicle, with walls scarlet as sin, and ceilings white as sepulchres.

Of course, such sensations are not necessary or universal (you have only to go into any famous foreign cathedral, when the long vacation army has gone forth, to be aware of this); but, I fancy, men often miss them—like other pleasant things in life—from being in too great a hurry to rest and ponder. Ponder! Why, Pascal himself could not be expected to meditate, with “Murray” in his hand—lost luggage on his heart—a wife querulous or curious at his side—and a cicerone droning into his ear discourse, in worse than an unknown tongue. Yet things are better, even now, than they were wont to be. Remonstrance has done much—ridicule more; let us hope that the roving Cockney will ere long constrain himself, to walk with uncovered head where some

others kneel and cross themselves ; not to trample upon worshippers with whom he cannot sympathise ; and not to prattle, an octave higher than the priest is singing.

So, it is likely that even a very practical layman, with no local or professional interests to bind him to the spot, may issue from the archway of the Close, after the briefest tarrying there, in an unusually placid, if not pensive frame of mind ; not repining—though perchance slightly inclined to regret—that fate should keep no canonry in store for his own declining years. In truth, it would be hard to find a more enviable asylum than those quiet mouldering walls—the natural home of all lichens and mosses and ivies—where the favoured church-veteran rests from his labours ; with just enough of duty in prospect to give dignity to his office, and salve the scruples of the conscientious sinecurist.

But, before the stranger has left the cloisters a furlong behind him, be very sure his mood will change ; the venerable quickly merges into the respectable ; the dulness, which some reprobates

maintain to be inseparable from respectability pure and simple, settles down on all surrounding objects, like a dense grey cloud. The citizens may be pleasant enough after their fashion ; indeed, as a rule, they are much given to hospitality, and entertain aliens with no small kindness ; they are no more to be blamed for being slightly lethargic, than the dwellers in Sleepy Hollow ; if there be a lack of enterprise and visible stagnation in trade, that, surely, is no affair of ours, who travel for no ‘house’ in particular, and whose interest in the Bankruptcy-list is, at least, deferred to a future day. It is hard to say, why, in such places, one should get bored so soon. Nevertheless, it is so. After a sojourn of ever so few week-day hours, we begin—not without some self-reproach—to feel as if we had been dining with a very old family friend, whose port and prosings are alike undeniable ; and begin to be ungratefully ingenious in inventing excuses for speedy departure.

Now Torrcaster—wherein this tale shall open—is not, socially speaking, a whit better or worse

than its fellows. It has, of course, every now and then weeks of chartered festivity; when some Society—choral or archæological—holds decorous revel there.

Then, in gloomy wainscoted parlours and passages, there is a ceaseless rustle of soft trailing raiment; a shimmer of jewels, and a glitter of eyes brighter yet; musical trills of laughter; and the light fall, rather imagined than heard, of dainty feet, as they sweep out to conquest or in to repose—the fair guests, whom the master of the quaint old house delights to honour. Then does clerical stock go up with a rush rapid and resistless; while the honest Plungers (Torr-easter is a cavalry head-quarters,) are constrained to submit to temporary eclipse; being put on escort duty, only *faute de mieux*, or on the morning of the inevitable ball, where they hope to reassert themselves—if not to retaliate. Then does the good old family solicitor, born and bred within the cathedral shadow—a man usually slow and solemn, beyond the telling, in gait, and speech and manner; ultra-canonical in his portly

presence; whose crown of white hair is venerable as a mitre—break into a fever-fit of activity, and work with head and feet, and voice and hands, like a machine endued for the nonce with forty manager-power; as, in truth, there is great need; since the reverend senior has to do all the work of two score well-meaning but helpless committee-men. Then does the whole city break out into a general extravaganza of flags and flowers; going in for pleasure with a perseverance that ignores fatigue and satiety. Fortunately for the constitutions of every one concerned, the curtain must drop on the Saturday at latest; when visitors and residents go, each to his own place; divided between satisfaction at a great success, and half-formed resolves never to undergo the like again.

But such festivals come not even biennially; so that Torrcaster has ample time to recruit its energies in slumber. The placid city accepts her position very contentedly, and nods on, from year's end to year's end; saving and except a dozen hours in each week, when she wakes up

quite briskly from her doze, relapsing again, before curfew-time on market-day.

This hebdomadal up-rousing is common of course to all towns such as I have described; if Torrcaster differs at all from others in the same class, it is in this, that the county element is, on these occasions, more prominently represented there. Not only do the great stock-farmers and corn-growers flock in to their 'Change; but many never fail to be present, whose interests are only remotely, if at all, bound up in agriculture. It has been a custom, time-honoured throughout the county far beyond the memory of man: Torrcaster market reckons on the countenance of all such Marlshire magnates as reside within reasonable distance, by road or rail; and rarely reckons in vain. The lords of the soil acquiesce in the arrangement very readily; if it entails any inconvenience, it is no worse than their fathers went through before them, or than their sons will undergo when they come into their heritage. So, there, you will find the same cheery faces, old and young, to the fore—be the weather wet

or dry: you never hear of a crack fixture of the M.H., nor of a favourite cover being shot, on the day devoted to Pales.

And the squirearchy has its reward. I am not aware that rents are lower, or land more profitable, in Marlshire than elsewhere; but, of a surety, the farmers grumble less; they support even the ravages of four-footed game with average equanimity,—one might almost say, magnanimously;—and burn with righteous indignation against poaching, well nigh as hotly as their landlords. With this comfortable state of things, I do believe these meetings in the market-place have much to do.

Then yoke the mules of wingèd pace,
And, Phintis, climb the car with me :

we will drive into Torrcaster with the rest of the world, and see what is a-doing this bright winter afternoon.

CHAPTER II.

SHADOWS IN THE CAMERA.

CHOOSE any coign of vantage you please—not hard to find, since the ground rises steeply on either side of the market-place—and wait and watch awhile.

At the first glance you will be struck, I think, with the *foreign* look of the whole scene. That strange jumble of architecture all around, where the builders seem to have had but one fixed idea—to make each house the strongest possible contrast to its neighbour; those sharp gables, with beams showing through the masonry, lighted here and there by latticed casements; those low beetle-browed pent-houses; those clustering booths, each with its own canvas covering;—surely, all these things we have seen a score of

times in our wanderings beyond the seas, when some grand old *rath-haus* filled the back-ground, or the *carillon* of a Belfry was chiming noon.

But soon you begin to realise that you are actually and thoroughly at home. There is not a trace of the brilliant medley of colours, that would at once attract—if it did not fatigue—your eye, in a similar scene abroad. You might look in vain, here, for the quaint coifs, the cap-towers of stiffened muslin, the gay kerchiefs twined through shiny hair, the glitter of metallic ornament,—for any, in fine, of those characteristics of costume which the Continental peasantry have cherished for ages. Even in holiday time, the Marlshire dames and lasses scorn to enhance their native charms, by the slightest sacrifice to the picturesque. In spite of contrasts of colouring in her attire, sometimes almost grotesque, she that was homely remains homely still.

Should any illusion as to your whereabouts linger in your fancy, it will vanish very quickly, as scraps of discourse come floating up from the Babel of tongues below. Babel, though, is a mis-

nomer ; for all are speaking not only the same language but the same dialect.

Now the Marlshire accent is by no means so marked in its peculiarities, as that of many other districts. After a moderately long sojourn—say a couple of years or so—in these parts, one, not in the country born, will be able to converse easily enough with a native of low degree ; yet it is as unmistakeable as any *patois* under the sun.

Years ago—shooting in French Flanders—I came suddenly upon a railway bridge then in course of construction ; and, being hot and weary, sate down in a shady nook to rest. There was a great clatter of tongues overhead, amongst which perhaps the Irish predominated (the contractor himself was an Emeralder, and patriotic as far as the main-chance would allow). Something had evidently gone wrong. I daresay about three score voices might have been going together, best pace ; yet, amongst them all, I recognised that one familiar accent—long-drawn, deliberate, unmusical as ever. Nevertheless, it brought back some very pleasant memories ; so pleasant, that

incontinently I arose, and, to his great surprise and jubilation, bestowed on the honest Marlshire man a not illiberal *trinkgeld*, for lang-syne's sake.

The market-place is not very crowded now ; for the bustle of serious business was over before noon. That throng that circulates to and fro is made up chiefly of idlers, and of the domestic commission-agents who have not yet completed their purchases ; nor is it dense enough, to prevent you distinguishing individual figures easily.

One, immediately beneath us, is worth noting, were it only for the peculiarities of its attire. The broad-leafed low-crowned hat, long-skirted coat, and drab nether clothing, were familiar to our forefathers ; but to us, in this century born, they have much of the effect of masquerade. There is a good deal of character in the rugged features ; and the massive head, framed in long unkempt hair—rich brown once, but sun-bleached and weather-stained now, even where it is not thickly flecked with grey—forms a fitting capital

to the square Doric column, so solidly set on its sturdy pedestals. No one can look at Harold Ethelstone, without thinking of his own pollard oaks.

In spite of all this, and an exceeding uncouthness of voice and manner, you are not much surprised when you hear that no English house, from Severn to Tweed, can boast of purer blood than flows in that old man's veins. Through good and evil fortune, through the chances and changes of dynasties, the Ethelstones of Holt have held and hold a large portion of lands that they tilled under the Heptarchy ; and — what is stranger still—with hardly a break in their direct lineage.

Walking through the portrait-gallery of any ancient family—you will remark, that certain peculiarities of feature and expression reproduce themselves, almost exactly, after the lapse of many generations. Perhaps there are moral, no less than physical, cycles. If it be so, surely the spirit of some ancestor must have animated the rough-hewn carcase of Harold Ethelstone. In

truth, his manner of life very much resembles that of a Thane. He is out amongst his flocks and herds, or riding through his shadowy woods, soon after sunrise ; he sits down soon after noon, to a patriarchal meal of mighty joints, washed down by floods of heavy Marlshire ale, to which any comer, on whatsoever errand, or of whatsoever degree, is welcome ; and he goes to his rest soon after curfew. Much given to field sports in his youth, he had seldom shot and never hunted of late years ; for his whole soul is wrapped up in agriculture, of which he is a shining light, albeit somewhat old-fashioned in his prejudices. Be the season foul or fair, old Harold grumbles consistently ; but they say that, with wheat even at 40s., the books of the great home-farm have shown a steady profit-balance at the year's end.

While good dame Eleanor lived, there was ever a regular interchange of hospitalities between Holt and the other great houses of the county, to which Squire Harold submitted with a sufficiently ill-grace ; but, since her death, many years ago,

he has grown more and more solitary, not to say boorish in his habits ; till, now, his intercourse with those of his own degree is chiefly confined to greetings in the market-place, or a passing nod on the road. He is much more at home with the farmers, who treat him with scarcely more deference than one of their own order : his own tenants are the only exceptions to this rule ; for Cedric or Hereward did not rule their *ceorls* more absolutely, than does the squire his dependents. He is a kind landlord enough ; never unjust or tyrannical ; and obedience may spring not less from love than fear ; but—be his behests for good or evil—there never was man born on his broad lands that twice said Harold Ethelstone nay.

The eldest of six stalwart sons married a lady of high degree, and lives on another of the family estates in a far-off county. He seldom comes to Holt. Albeit there is no feud betwixt them, the old man ever frets and fumes in presence of his first-born ; he is so fond of his acres that it chafes him to look on the face of their future lord : it is

not the revenues of Holt—for he is open-handed to prodigality with his children—but the tillage of all those fair swathes, and the pruning of those flourishing woodlands, that Harold half begrudges his heir.

A strong contrast with the squire, is the man with whom he is now conversing earnestly—so earnestly, indeed, that a fierce light flashes, ever and anon, out of his broad blue eyes, as he emphasises his words with much energy of gesture. A very dapper and debonair little person—a genial smile always hovering about his handsome mouth—whiskers almost too carefully curled for unassisted nature—dressed in the perfection of quiet sporting taste: indeed, that riding-coat is worthy of Saville Row; the drab cords fit like an easy glove; and the brilliant polish of the butcher-boots gleams through the thick mud-flecks that tell of long and fast horse-travel.

That is Mr. Chalkley, of Northam Hall, owner, in fee-simple, of 2000 acres of the best land in Marlshire, and tenant-farmer of as many more. He seldom misses a meet of the M. H., riding

undeniable cattle, of whose necks he is not sparing ; his wife's ponies are almost as pretty, in their way, as their fair mistress—no small word : looking to the quality of the liquor (to say nothing of the liberality of its dispersal, wherein there is no comparison at all), I would liever dine with him any day than with his landlord,—though the last-named banquets under a roof, groined, gilt, and armorially panelled, lofty enough for the Earl and K. G. that he is ; while the ivy has not so far to climb before it tops the grey gables of jolly old Northam Hall.

Yet is Arthur Chalkley very wise in his generation. Though things have gone prosperously with his family for many years, so that its importance has been surely, and not slowly, waxing ; he writes himself down yeoman, as did his fathers before him ; and never—with his goodwill—will his son struggle into squirearchy. He finds time for work, be sure, as well as play ; or his name would not stand where it does in agricultural chronicles. Not only from distant English and Scottish districts, but from far beyond the four

seas, do strangers come, to be initiated in the wonders wrought in high farming by the scientific development of drainage, and sewage, and steam. Ay, and—with all his pleasant smile and genial careless manner—there are few in Marlshire keener at a bargain than *ce cher Chocklée*, as his foreign admirers call him. In that one that he is now driving with Squire Ethelstone, it would be hard to say which will get the best of it: about even betting, I think; with, perhaps, the old one for choice.

You would guess, at once, that the occupants of yonder sober brown barouche, drawn close up to the pavement a few yards further on, are people of weight and importance. So, indeed, they are. Sir Pierce Peverell represents the county; and his wife would fain rule it. Many years ago she signed her own commission as Lady Lieutenant; and since then, under her tyranny, there have been many malcontents—few rebels. The dames of higher degree who might have well disputed the supremacy, have always been too idle, or too timid, for serious rivalry.

Taking the baronet first: you see a man rather advanced in years, with small white whiskers hardly trenching on broad sanguine cheeks; glassy grey eyes, very prominent and lustreless; with no particular expression on his face, save lethargic good-nature. In his present posture, you hardly realise his great stature and lankiness of limb; but when erect, his huge head, overlapping a narrow carcase and neck unnaturally prolonged, looks as if it were set on a spear. When you hear that Sir Pierce Peverell has sate amongst our legislators for more than a quarter of a century, you are irresistibly reminded of Oxenstiern's hackneyed truism—"See, with how little wisdom this world is governed." Of a truth, the poor baronet is so exceedingly dull of comprehension and slow of reasoning, that he finds life anything but play-work: yet he plods through his daily round of duties very conscientiously; and is generally to be found at his proper posts—striving hard to look as if he understood the business in hand, and ever ready to record an honest, if a silent, vote.

Of a very different stamp is the dame who reclines at Sir Pierce's side. There are traces of beauty still in the gloomy face ; though, with that dead-white complexion and dull black hair, it must always have been of the funereal order ; but the first thought that strikes you is—How could that woman have been wooed or won ? Surely, no whisper of endearment can ever have escaped those thin cast-iron lips that, even when they smile, seem to be performing a set, distasteful ceremony ; far less could they have moulded themselves to meet or return a kiss : the stiff straight lashes that shade, without softening, hard cold eyes, can never have been wet with tender tears.

After one passing glance, you feel disposed to credit all the tales that are abroad about her ladyship's temper. It was born with her, no doubt ; for the ancient North-country family from which she sprang, has long been evilly notorious for the savage outbreaks of passion, which have brought not a few of its members to a violent end. In old times, men were wont to say, that the sun never

went down on a Churton's wrath, but there was sure to be bloodshed before morning; and not a very remote ancestor of Lady Peverell's, with the certainty of the scaffold before him, went on straight to his revenge.

When Sir Pierce brought his bride home, her fame had preceded her; there was much speculation, and not a little wagering, as to which would take and keep the lead; the odds being heavily in the grey mare's favour. Truly, at first, the race seemed all one way; her ladyship went off as if she never meant to be caught; but she had to deal with a stubborn, if not a swift, opponent, who fairly collared her at last, and ran the longest. Putting metaphor aside—she did lead Sir Pierce a terrible life for some three years after their marriage; then the domestic broils appeared to cease. If common report is to be believed, peace sprang out of the bosom of war—in this wise.

On a certain memorable occasion, the lady was irritated by Sir Pierce's stolid indifference into forgetfulness of both self-respect and self-com-

mand ; it is possible that an accidental side-view of the vast red vacuous face was an irresistible temptation : be this as it may, the story goes that she suddenly raised her hand—no light or frail one—and smote her liege lord on the cheek, a good, hearty ringing blow, that made the ears of those who only heard of it to tingle. The baronet was staggered, but not perceptibly startled or surprised : he paused a little, ruminating silently, as was his wont, before any active movement whatsoever : then he laid an iron grasp on either shoulder of his assailant, and shook and swayed her to and fro till she grew faint and breathless, and could scarcely stagger to her sofa, to crouch there, shivering and moaning. And, all the while, the heavy benevolence of his own countenance never changed a whit. This very unromantic episode is to be taken with several grains of salt ; inasmuch as it rests on the unsupported testimony of a discharged waiting-woman, who professed to have assisted at it through the half-opened door of a neighbouring chamber ; but it had no gross elements of improbability, and has ever

been currently believed throughout the country-side. Certain it is, that, from that particular epoch, Sir Pierce has been allowed to 'gang his ain gate' without active molestation, and even to exercise paramount authority over all important movements of his household.

But, with this half-submission to her husband, Lady Peverell's scanty power of conciliation and forbearance seems to have been exhausted : with all the rest of the world she preserves, at best, an armed neutrality. She is fond, and proud, too, in her own cold way, of her son—a very type of herself in feature and temper ; but the pair are always snarling and snapping at each other in a truly wolfish fashion ; while her daughter (there are only two children), who is unfortunately unattractive in her appearance, has such a time of it at home, as falls to the lot, I hope, of few plain, marriageable maidens. It is well for Janet Peverell, that she was born with an excellent constitution, a brave, hopeful heart, and a keen eye for silver linings in clouds. As it is, she seems to have her fair share of life's sunshine. Were

it not for her mother's taunts, I doubt if she would remark the tardiness of wooers or occasional absence of partners; nor even thus, is she inclined to repine. She only shakes her comical little head, and says, with her own honest laugh, "Never mind, mamma : my turn will come soon." To which let all her many friends say Amen, cordially.

That small wizened man, with the restless, twinkling eyes and bird-like face—he always seems to *peck* while he is speaking—who leans over the barouche door, talking eagerly to Sir Pierce Peverell, is the Reverend Randal Sherrington, the great oracle of Marlshire; whom the natives point out with pride to all new-comers as a very prodigy of eloquence and learning. Indeed, there is no subject under heaven that he will not discuss, with bewildering, if not convincing, fluency. One curious in statistics once took the trouble to note down the heads of our parson's discourse for the space of twenty minutes or so. The foreign policy of the Ministry—the costumes at the last country ball—the merits of a new top-

dressing for heavy land—the decipherment of Runic inscriptions—the orthodoxy of a certain prelatrical pamphlet—the best way to beat a noted cover for cocks—on each and everyone of these topics did he deliver oracular judgment, to the perfect satisfaction of himself and his audience. It is a quarter-session question that he has mooted with the baronet; if you ever watched the action of a boring tool on very tough limestone, it will give you some idea of the process, whereby the Reverend Randal is striving to drive his own view of the case into the porches of the other's sluggish brain.

Further on yet, close to the arched entrance to the chief inn of Torreaster, you see a little knot of loungers; in the midst of whom stands a burly, middle-aged man, taller by half a head than any of his companions. That is Mr. Braybroke, of the Grange—“Frank” to his cronies—“The Squire” to all the rest of the world down here. He holds his precedence rather by virtue of office than of position; for there are half a dozen others, of like degree, of larger territory,

and more ancient name (indeed, though they have taken root so kindly in the county, the Braybrokes were *novi homines* to the grandsires of many now living). But the present owner of the Grange has borne on his own broad shoulders all the management, and half the cost, of the Marlshire hounds since he came into his inheritance. He has had a difficult and delicate game to play; some of the Marlshire magnates are unusually keen in shooting rivalry, and can hardly comprehend the co-existence of pheasants and foxes. But his tact, and perseverance, and good humour, have been too much for the most crabbed of the game-preserving sceptics: his hounds are never stopped whilst running now, let them head whithersoever they will; and vulpecide is a crime only darkly hinted at, even by keepers in conclave.

Time was when Frank Braybroke's bluff, handsome face—very like some portraits of our Eighth Henry—and bright brown eyes, lingered long in certain womanly memories, and may have caused more heartaches than ever he wist of; but the

boldest of matrimonial speculators have long ceased to conspire against his peaceful bachelorhood. There is little of the saint, much less of the misogynist, about the burly Squire. Whispers—italicised with nods and winks of deeper meaning than words—have been afloat not unfrequently anent his frolics in foreign parts ; but—whatever may have been his youthful frailties—The Squire has never ventured ‘ to dash violently against the throne ’ of Social Justice. The most rigid upholder of conventionalities, need have found no stumbling-block in such mild misdoings as his county was bound to be cognisant of. He is steady enough, now, even the scandal-mongers will affirm—and with reason good ; for there are broad streaks of silver in his thick chestnut curls, and he rides three good stone heavier than when he wound his first blast on the Master’s horn. He knows every gate and gap in the country, as well as a hare does her favourite meuse ; so that he can always keep within a reasonable distance of his hounds ; but he owns to shirking stiff timber and blind ditches, and looks rather more

for shoulders than for jumping-power in his weight-carriers.

There is a knowing smile on the Squire's lip just now, as he watches the slow approach of another Marlshire celebrity, who is hobbling up, evidently with an eye to business. The new comer is no other than Tony Cannell, whose name is a very household word amongst all such as delight in horse-flesh.

An elderly man of monstrous obesity—unhealthily pale and utterly beardless—whose vast, pendulous cheeks seem to sway hither and thither with every motion of his ponderous limbs—yet the face is not exactly repulsive. There is a merry gleam in the small deep-set eyes, and a humorous expression about the mobile lips, that remind you, at once, of a certain famous Liberator. Think of such a flesh-mountain as that being—‘a jocky well versed in numbers’ (*vide Bonny-castle, passim*). One might as easily fancy dear John Falstaffe, a captain of light cavalry. Of a truth, it is many years since Tony has aspired to witch the world with any feats of activity what-

soever: occasionally, with many grunts and groans and maledictions, he heaves himself into the saddle of a stolid cob very much of his own build; but, as a rule, he risks his precious carcase in nothing more perilous than a capacious, well-cushioned gig, with a fast trotter in the shafts. But he is a wonderful judge of horse-flesh: those little twinkling eyes of his will pick out every good and bad point, from crest to fetlock, almost mechanically; whether the animal be made up for sale, stale from hard work, or rough from the straw-yard. Once having heard Tony over a deal—you cease to marvel at his professional celebrity. Since the days of Ulysses, surely no mortal tongue ever moved on such well-oiled hinges: in spite of ghastly faults in grammar, and an intense vulgarity of manner and tone, you would stand entranced at the easy flow of his magnificent mendacity, as you would listen to the gurgling of a swift deep river. The brief funeral oration which another less famous couper pronounced over his own first-born, might well be spoken over Tony's grave.

“Bless him! There never was so sweet a liar!”

Hark to him now, as he sidles up to Frank Braybroke, and beckons him a little aside from the rest, with a certain mystery in his manner.

“Mornin,’ Squire. I was half afraid I shouldn’t find you; they said you was going out early. Might I ask you to drive round by my place? I wouldn’t trouble you for nothin’, you know; but there’s a picter up there as *is* worth lookin’ at; one of your own sort, if ever I see one, and I’ve known your stamp these twenty years. Sixteen hands, dark chesnut—your colour again, Squire; legs as flat as my hand and clean as a foal’s; as to weight—why, I wish I durst ride over a country,—he’d carry *me* as safe and easy as a chair. All this week, they’ve been comin’ to me with money in their hands and tears in their eyes; and ‘Tony,’ says they, ‘that horse I must have, whether or no.’ ‘But, excuse me,’ I says; ‘I won’t pull him out for ne’er a one of ye, till The Squire has looked him over.’”

The orator is compelled to halt here, from

lack, not of matter but of breath, and Bray-broke's deep, mellow laugh breaks in.

“ Sounds tempting, Tony, certainly ; and your thoughtfulness for me is really touching. But I’m afraid I haven’t a guinea to part with, nor a tear to shed. We’re very full at home, just now, and I’ve had an extra pull or two lately ; I can’t afford such luxuries as you’re talking of. By the bye, how did he come to you, if it’s not a delicate question ? ”

A fat smile of contentment overspreads the dealer’s vast visage, as oil diffuses itself over placid water ; he knows, right well, that the customer who stops to parley is already within his meshes.

“ Lor’ bless you, Squire ! you may ask what you like, and welcome. I ain’t got no secrets from you. I stopped at Blechynden last week for the second day’s racin’ : there I met young Dick Wylder,—you remember him ; his mare ran up for our Hunters’ Stakes last year ;—he had this horse with him, but he didn’t mean sellin’ ; if he hadn’t been so terrible hard hit, we

shouldn't have made a deal; I had to shake the notes at him, I can tell you. He rides heavier than you, Squire; and don't stick at no price for his cattle. But he's pretty well at the end of his tether now, they say; tho' it aint long since he come into a very tidy fortune. It's a sad case; but what can you expect, when a man takes to drinkin', and gamblin', and gay ladies?"

The old reprobate wags his ponderous head, solemnly and sorrowfully; just as if he were not himself the most notorious of evil liver—feeding with half his hard-gotten gains the Ring, the hellites, and the venal Venus. There is more of real sympathy in the Squire's face, though the laugh is still in his eye.

"Indeed! I'm right sorry to hear that: though I scarcely know Wylder to speak to. I daresay his ruin began with his buying horses he had no occasion for. Well, Tony, I'll look round and see Perfection, or whatever his name is; but don't expect me to deal. I give you fair warning, mind."

Notwithstanding which sage self-denial I

should like to lay a shade of odds on the paragon in question finding his way to the Grange stables ; and he may turn out a very honest, useful animal after all. For Tony Cannell is not a whit more of a Barabbas than many of his fellows : there is more of a natural racy humour than of deliberate dishonesty at the bottom of his tremendous mendacity ; at all events, were he looking out for a plunder he would scarcely pick his victim from the ranks of the Marlshire squirearchy.

And now—*Place aux dames.*

A measure of prudence not less than of courtesy, as Lady Laura Brancepeth's phaeton sweeps down the steep decline of North Street, and round the corner of the Town Hall, at a liberal half-speed ; while all obstacles seem to melt miraculously away, before the happy audacity of the fair charioteer. Her ladyship's favourite colours are black and scarlet ; and they are as well known, by this time, as those of the most popular turfite. You see she mounts them everywhere : in the rosettes under the ears of those high-stepping

browns, that she persists in calling ponies, though they stand three inches over any gallo-way standard known ; in the glossy bear's-skin, with its gorgeous lining, that covers her below the waist so comfortably ; in the knowing turban-hat wherein gleams a feather like a fire-flaught ; last, not least, in her full firm lips and bold bright eyes.

She is the leader of a very fast set in town ; and, when its members rally round their *Reine Gaillarde*—as is their wont at certain festive seasons—they scandalise the sober neighbourhood not a little with their pranks and vagaries. Lady Laura's admirers—most of whom, it must be owned, belong to the sterner sex—uphold her to be as innocent of wrong intent as the bitterest of prudish matrons ; even her enemies, while they keep up a perfect pebble-storm of small insinuations, can find no stone weighty enough to damage seriously her fair fame. She says herself,—“If Mr. Brancepeth don't mind, it is no business of anybody else's ;” and, so, goes on her reckless way rejoicing ; meeting friend or foe

with the same gay freedom—ever prodigal of her smiles and chary of her sighs. She knows that she finds little favour in the Dean of Torrcaster's scowling eyes, who is somewhat too pointed in his frequent allusion to Moabitish women; yet, when the arch-Levite passes by on the other side, she returns his icy salute gracefully and carelessly; just as if she were acknowledging the reverence of some hard-riding farmer—her humble admirer and sworn liegeman.

The châtelaines of Peverell Park and Brance-peth Castle meet often; always with a show of outward courtesy; but at the heart of the elder dame there is war to the knife, that she sometimes finds it hard to dissemble. True, the Lady Laura has never troubled herself to dispute the other's implied supremacy in county matters; but Lady Peverell thanks her not for a forbearance that springs evidently rather from indolence or indifference, than from reverence or fear. She hates *La Reine Gaillarde* for her haughty beauty; for her popularity amongst men, old and young, high and low; for the merry mischief gleaming

in her great black eyes; most of all, for the sharp mocking tongue, that spares not even her own awful name. She would give ten years of life, to be able—aye, were it only in thought—to set her foot on the neck that has never once bowed itself before her, and to see her enemy's honour laid in the dust.

All this, too, Lady Laura knows; yet it chafes her not one whit, neither does she deign to re-quite hate with hate. Marlshire gossips say, that a battle-royal must eventually come off; and should the interests or fancies of these two ever clash seriously, there will doubtless be a very pretty quarrel. But meanwhile, there are no petty bickerings. When the Censoress is unusually frigid or disagreeable, Lady Laura contents herself with making a comic *moue*, and studies fresh points for future mimicry. They are fond of boudoir theatricals at Brancepeth Castle; and the 'make up' of its mistress, as Lady Peverell—with the aid of much pearl-powder, burnt cork, and a head-dress of the severest Doric order—is simply perfect.

One more *croquis* before we close this bundle of sketches. Mark that dainty dame, tripping delicately over the pavement to her pony-carriage, round which are lounging three or four cavaliers, evidently soldiers in mufti. Nothing can be more subdued than the whole tone of her attire, in which the soberest shades blend so harmoniously; that tiny bonnet is a real triumph of art concealing art; you would swear it was quite an accident when, ever and anon, a flutter of the looped-up dress reveals the neatest ankle in Marlshire, cased in hosen matching the striped kirtle of violet and grey. Very quiet and composed, too, is the pale, demure little face, in which there is no remarkable beauty, save a pair of large liquid eyes, of a colour ever changing. When she speaks there is a plaintiveness in her low, sweet voice, as if she sought for sympathy in some secret sorrow.

Yet, O, my friend, I bid you beware. Blanche Ellerslie has wrought as much mischief in her time, as any Vivien of them all, and is still insatiate of conquest. Under the spell of her

waving hands have bowed themselves, ere this, heads as grey—if not as wise—as Merlin. Amongst her victims the military element is very conspicuous; indeed the Service has suffered from her fascinations since Blanche's girlhood; for her father was a general of high repute, and her late husband died in his harness, four years ago, colonel of a heavy-dragoon regiment. In how many albums, I wonder, does her *mignon* figure hold the chiefest place; and on how many dreary barrack-rooms does she beam (photographically) with her soft treacherous eyes? Mrs. Ellerslie finds it not inconvenient, occasionally, to bring out a special 'scuffler'—as—"on papa's staff for years," or—"one of poor Horace's brother officers." The assertion cannot easily be controverted; for even scandal-mongers don't carry old army-lists about their persons; and it invests the whole proceeding with a halo of duteous piety. Be it observed, that the fair widow is never more dangerous, than when she supposes herself to be flirting—*in memoriam*.

Why she should have refused several eligible

offers, since she doffed her weeds, would not be easy to say. It cannot be, that matrimonial experiences deter her; for, that the yoke never galled her slender neck, is most certain.

Colonel Ellerslie was not a very wise or just man; but he had sense enough to believe in honesty at the bottom of his pretty pet's coquettishness; ill it would have fared with any Iago, that had dared to breathe a doubt on her honour. Rigid, even to tyranny, in matters of discipline—he was the most submissive of domestic slaves. It was good to see how his manner changed, as he clanked in over his own threshold after a field-day—how the choleric martinet became, instantly, the courteous host—how heartily he would welcome Blanche's prime favourite for the nonce; ay, though it were the especial subaltern, into whom, but an hour ago, he had been pouring canister-volleys of malediction; for (as his men were wont to say, half admiringly) “he was a fine free-swearer.” While they lived together, time, and trouble, and cost were as nought, in the Colonel's eyes, where any caprice of his wife was

to be gratified ; and when he lay a-dying, it is to be feared, he thought far more anxiously about her future than his own. It may be, that the very fact of her having been so thoroughly spoiled and indulged, made the wilful little widow somewhat cautious : it was, indeed, by no means likely she would repeat her luck in a second venture. She was wealthy enough to be able to satisfy all her not immoderate fancies ; for, not long before he died, Colonel Ellerslie had inherited a very pretty estate, a few miles from Torr-caster ; this he bequeathed, with all his other worldly chattels, to Blanche, unfettered by the shadow of a condition. With all his faults, he was too unselfish to nourish those posthumous jealousies that better men, perhaps, have not been ashamed to indulge in. Had he known that Blanche would wed again before the year's end, he would never have begrudged it, if only he had been assured that her fair fame and future happiness were quite safe.

“ Don't fret, darling.”

These were the last intelligible words that

stole, in a hoarse whisper, from under the huge grizzled moustaches, just before the stern eyes set themselves for ever and aye.

Perhaps Blanche was really more grateful to her husband, and more careful of his memory, than the world gives her credit for. At any rate, she has been more than difficult in her choice of a successor. Still young, and fair enough to mar the chances of many marriageable maidens (the Marlshire *chaperons* have long ago put the blackest cross against her name)—still prone to flirtation, and full of perilous fascination as ever—she yet, to all outward appearance, remains heart-whole and scatheless; warring under her own *guidon*, and for her own hand—a sworn Free Companion.

If there be any more notabilities abroad in Torrcaster market-place to-day, they must wait for a more convenient season to be presented to you. It is full time that we set forward, seriously, with our tale.

CHAPTER III.

THROUGH THE TWILIGHT.

OF the many inns in which Torreaster rejoices, the Nag's Head is by no means the most eminent. Very modest it is in outward pretensions ; standing in a by-street rather remote from the market-place, you might pass its doors a dozen times without ever glancing up at the dusky sign —battered, weather-beaten, hard to decipher as any old knightly shield ; yet is it much affected by many gentles and yeomen of Marlshire. Divers give divers reasons for favouring this especial hostelry : the real one, I believe, is to be found in the popularity of its barmaid.

Let it not for an instant be supposed, that the attractions of this excellent person are, at all, of the flaunting, or meretricious order. Lucy Denison must always have been very pleasant and

comely to look upon, but never a beauty ; and she is well stricken in years, though she carries them so lightly. Even in early youth, they say, she was very sober in her attire ; and, of late, she makes few concessions to the fashions of an innovating age. Perhaps this may have something to do with the acknowledged fact of her never looking any older ; for, of a truth, Time seems to have no hold on that hardy perennial. If the bloom faded long ago from the quiet face, there is, at least, never a wrinkle there, and the smooth dark hair has not grown scanty or dull. The Nag's Head has changed landlords more than once in her time ; but none were bold enough to dream of ousting Miss Denison from office. Through all successions of dynasty she abides in her own place—absolutely supreme over her nominal superiors—as immoveable, and far more honoured than the famous Vicar of Bray.

The familiars of the Nag's Head treat Lucy with this much of deference—that they are as careful in her presence to abstain from rude or blasphemous talk, as they would be before their

own mothers and sisters; yet is the ancient bar-maid by no means averse to mild and seemly banter; which she parries and returns, with the calm self-possession of one who has dealt with the cunning tongue-fencers of two generations. It is in her pleasant, kindly manner, and invincible good temper, added to an absolute incapacity of speaking ill of any living creature, that Lucy's chief attractions lie. Not only is she a favourite with the male frequenters of Torreaster market; but the wives and daughters, even of the chief of these, sometimes do not disdain to rest themselves awhile in her inner sanctum, and will chat with her concerning county news and the like, just as freely as they would with any intimate friend.

It was about the busiest hour at the Nag's Head of all the day; for the winter afternoon was closing in fast. Such prudent wayfarers as cared not for a darkling ride, were crowding in for their parcels and their stirrup-cups. The narrow passage was almost impassable at times; and Lucy's practised hands and eyes and ears

were all doing double duty. On such occasions, save to a very few privileged intruders, the bar was always jealously closed.

Such a one must have been that stout, elderly farmer—sitting in a cosy arm-chair near the door of that inner sanctum, through which no male foot ever passed—unfolding the London paper that had just arrived, with a leisurely air of anticipated enjoyment, quite heedless of the bustle without.

In truth, Mr. Lester has something more than the rights of very old acquaintanceship to presume upon. Many years ago he asked Lucy Denison if she cared to take the keeping of his heart. It puzzled many at the time—perhaps it has puzzled herself once or twice since—to say why she refused the wealthy yeoman's offer. But refuse it she did ; kindly and gratefully. Stout John Lester was bitterly disappointed, and not a little chafed, at first ; but he took the blow manfully, just as he would have done any bodily pain ; he was too busy to indulge in moping, and too good-hearted to nourish malice ; so the two

were soon as true friends again as ever. Indeed, Lucy has occasionally been heard to banter her ancient lover on his determined bachelorhood ; suggesting certain eligible maids or widows for his consideration ; but—with never a tinge of romance in either of their honest natures—they know, right well, that both are vowed to celibacy, not less than any monk or nun.

Suddenly Miss Denison's quick roving glance lighted on a single face, in the crowded passage, and rested there ; chiefly because that face wore an anxious, troubled expression, that seemed strange to her—knowing the man. She beckoned to him, opening, at the same time, the half-door of the bar.

There was nothing very striking in the newcomer's exterior. A figure something below middle-height, rather strongly than gracefully built—features the reverse of statuesque, yet not ignoble or repellent in their irregularity—clear grey eyes, not apt to flash variably, but meeting friend or foe with the same steady tranquil light, hair closely cropped, and bushy whiskers closely

trimmed, both of the same deep chestnut-red—a complexion whose original fairness, long exposure to wind and sun could not quite subdue: this, to all whom it may concern, is the *signalment* of one known to all Marlshire, high and low, as “Tom Seyton of Warleigh.”

“ You want something, I’m sure, sir,” the bar-maid said. “ Is it anything I can do for you ? ”

It was a good point in Seyton’s face, that it always lighted up while he was speaking; and strangers were apt to be favourably impressed by the first sound of his voice—it had the round jovial ring, of one often exercised in the open air.

“ Many thanks, Miss Lucy: it’s a shame to disturb you now. Do you think you could coax the paper out of Lester’s hands for three minutes? There’s news in it—good or bad—that I must carry home with me: and I ought to have started half-an-hour ago.”

“ I thought it was something more serious,” Miss Denison answered, with a light laugh. “ Of course you can have the paper, Mr. Seyton. Mr.

Lester will have plenty of time to finish it; indeed he's plenty of time for everything—except business. Would you believe it? He's been loitering about here the whole morning."

The old yeoman lifted his head, with a look of comic penitence on his broad face, and held out the paper before he spoke.

"Dont'ee be so hard on a man, Miss Lucy. Muster Seyton knows, I mostly work before I play; and there's not a many earlier in market-hall than me. They took all the beasts I had to sell, without much chaffering I can tell'ee: that aint my fault, is it? And he knows, I don't want no coaxing to lend him whatever he's a mind to: don't ye, Squire?"

Tom Seyton was too deep in the 'Times' to answer. It was not long before he found the paragraph he sought; as his eye lighted on it, the eager expression of his face changed into one of blank disappointment; and he crushed the paper flat in his strong grip, with a muttered exclamation of surprise and anger, that made both his hearers start.

“Lord save us, Squire! There’s nothing wrong with Crusader, surely?”

Seyton was utterly guiltless of serious betting propensities; but for many years he had been wont, immediately after each Derby, to back his fancy for the next one, for one single 50*l.* note. He had been lucky enough this year, as every one knew, to take ‘forties’ about a horse that had been rising steadily ever since, till he stood firm at very short odds; and Marlshire, thenceforward, became interested in the colt.

“No one is dead, I do hope?”—said the feminine sympathiser.

Seyton recovered himself quickly, and his brow cleared again as he answered.

“I haven’t looked among the deaths, Miss Lucy; and Crusader’s all right, Lester, as far as I know. Its another heavily-backed young one that has gone wrong; and for a race that you never had much interest in; nor I either, so far. I wish I hadn’t now.”

He handed back the ‘Times’ to the farmer, pointing with his finger to a certain place. There,

appeared the Oxford Class List just promulgated ; and there—dividing with about thirty more the doubtful honours of a ‘Third’—stood the name of

Vincentius Flemyng, ex Aede Christi

Honest John Lester looked up into the other’s face with a quaint puzzled expression ; evidently overflowing with sympathy, but not knowing why or wherefore it was expected of him.

In spite of his vexation, Seyton almost laughed out, as he said—

“ You must remember my brother-in-law ; though he’s not been much in these parts since he went to Oxford. Well—almost every-one expected he would have come out among those first half-dozen ; and—you see where he stands. It’ll be a bitter disappointment to my wife ; and I don’t know how his mother will bear it. As for me——”

That good-hearted Tom wouldn’t finish his sentence ; it looked too like hitting a man when down, to confess that his own expectations had never been so sanguine.

The yeoman shook his grizzled head with intense gravity, as if he *now* thoroughly appreciated the whole length and breadth of the disaster; being still nearly as much in the dark as ever.

“Surely, I remember Master Vincent, right well; a very pleasant-spoken young genelman; and main clever, I’ll go bail. It’s cruel hard on him, for sartin. Mayhap, though, he’ll have better luck next time.”

“I’m sure he will,” Lucy chimed in more energetically than was her wont; “it couldn’t be *his* fault either—whose-ever it was.”

This it is that invests feminine condolence with its peculiar charm—the fair partizan is so daringly irrational in her sympathy; disdaining all forms of argument, save the pure and simple *petitio principii*.

Tom Seyton put both consolations aside, mildly but firmly.

“They don’t run those races in heats, Lester; and they give no Consolation Stakes, up there, for beaten horses. Miss Lucy, it’s just like you,

to make excuses for everybody. But, if you take the fault off poor Vincent's heart, I fear you'll only shift it on to his head ; unless, indeed, it was our fault, for always over-rating him. Well, I must be starting. I've a heavy message to carry home, and it won't grow any lighter by my loitering. Good-by, and thanks."

So, without more ado, Tom Seyton got to horse, and five minutes later was almost clear of the town. But, before he quite emerged into the open fields, he was fated to meet with a fresh cause for pondering—if not for anxiety.

Tom Seyton was methodical in all things : his present vexation did not make him forget, that his wife had entrusted him with a message to a certain bird-stuffer of local renown. To deliver this, he had to turn somewhat from his direct way home. A by-lane led back by a short cut into the main road ; at a sharp angle in this, he drew bridle, involuntarily.

A narrow footpath, pent in on either side by a dead wall, and an old-fashioned clipped hedge, branched off through a turnstile, to the right :

just within this last, a man and woman were standing; conversing so earnestly, that they never heard the horse's hoofs till it was too late to retreat further into the shadow. No need to ask the subject of their talk: the veriest child could have told, that they were practising an early scene in the greatest of all dramas—the only one of which, as actors or spectators, our kind has never grown a-weary; though its first un-dress rehearsal was enacted before the Seasons began.

Both started, as the tall mounted figure loomed suddenly behind them through the darkening twilight; but the male culprit—if fault there were—was palpably the most troubled and disconcerted of the twain. As I have said, it was too late to retreat; but he moved quickly, so as to place himself directly between his companion and the new comer; bending forward over her, till her face was almost entirely concealed.

In truth, many men might have passed on—uncertain as to the damsel's identity; but those keen, grey eyes of Tom Seyton's had been trained by long practice in flight-shooting, till night and

day were nearly alike to them : he recognised the pair so thoroughly and instantaneously, that he could hardly check an exclamation that sprang to his lips. After the first emotion of surprise, his natural delicacy reasserted itself ; he looked straight to his front, and passed on without an attempt at greeting, or one backward glance ; feeling absolutely ashamed of his involuntary intrusion. But, when he had gone a hundred yards or so, at the same slow pace as before, he drove his foot home in the stirrup with a gesture of angry impatience ; and began muttering to himself, half aloud—

“ Then *he* means to make a fool of himself—after the fashion of his fathers ? It must be looked to, at once. And yet one ought to be quite sure, before making that poor mother of his miserable. The boy is nearly out of leading-strings, too, if he chooses to be desperate, and defy beggary. It’s a puzzle altogether : I’ll tell Kate about it : her head is worth a dozen of mine in cases of love-law. Bless her ! I wish that was the worst I had to tell her to-night : as for her

mother——” a long low whistle completed the sentence. “Yes, you’re quite right, Minnie; I don’t blame you for getting fretful: step out as fast as you like now, old lady. It’s the same with trouble, as with a big fence—the more you look at it, the less you like it: I never knew ‘craning’ help a man yet.”

So Tom Seyton gave his mare her head; and, with more care *en croupe* than he had carried for many a day, rode homewards briskly through the night.

Let us linger, awhile, with the couple whose love-passages he lately disturbed. Inasmuch as to the historic eye all dark things are light, we may pass them under brief inspection, in despite of the gathering shadows.

CHAPTER IV.

FAMILY PORTRAITS.

TRULY, you might travel over many a league of English ground, before meeting with a handsomer pair. Yet the one point that strikes you first, is the marked contrast between the two.

The girl is a superb specimen of that peculiar type of beauty, common to almost all nations of Scandinavian origin—not necessarily involving purity of blood or descent; for you find it as often amongst the peasantry as in any other order. We all know its characteristics; unsparing wealth of golden hair, not over fine or silky, as a rule; long, lithe, shapely limbs; and a roundness of contour, apt to become massively luxuriant all too soon; clear cut aquiline features; a broad white brow, overhanging the

splendours of brightest blue eyes, lest apt to melt than to sparkle; last, but not least, a glorious complexion, in which red and white are too rarely mingled for imitation by any human hand.

It would, perhaps, be hard to say why, looking on beauty such as this, we seem to feel, instinctively, that the animal element there must dominate over the intellectual; and why, wishing to do it honour, we should exalt every other epithet before we think of—‘lovely.’

Nevertheless, of love at first sight (in the vulgar acceptation of the term), these magnificent *blondes* always can claim their fair share: of admiration, they engross more than an arithmetical proportion. If Bessie Standen carries her handsome head somewhat higher than quite becomes a modest maiden, it is surely by right of many conquests.

Now—turn and look at Brian Maskelyne. Not often, near the centre of the temperate zone, do you meet with those smooth soft cheeks, like white camellia petals—pale before the gloss of

youth and health has left them ; that blue-black hair all crisp and waving ; those great velvety eyes, sleeping indolently in their languid lustre, till some strong passion makes them gleam like a jaguar's. It is one of those faces into which you will see fortune-tellers and the like peer ever wistfully ; even their simple science can tell that such are generally doomed, at one season or another in life, to figure in some sad, if not sinful, story.

A few months still must pass, before Brian Maskelyne shall attain his legal majority ; nor, even then, does he come into the lordship of the broad demesnes to which he is the sole heir. Nay : it is in his power wilfully to cast away his birthright ; for not an acre of the Mote property is now entailed.

When the will of Brian's father was opened, some ten years ago, many cried shame on it ; and a few scrupled not to accuse the widow of having beguiled a weak uxorious husband into indulging her with an undue stretch of authority, at the expense of her son.

The terms of the will ran thus:—

On Brian Maskelyne's attaining the age of twenty-one, he became entitled to a yearly allowance of 1000*l.*; four years later—should no forfeiture intervene—he came into unfettered possession of his whole inheritance. Also, if in the meantime he should marry with his mother's full consent, Mote, and all thereto belonging, became absolutely Brian's, for settlement or any other purpose. But if, before attaining the said age of twenty-five, he should contract a legal marriage, unknown to his mother or against her will, then the whole fee-simple of the estates, and the disposal of all real and personal property whatsoever, became vested at once in Mrs. Maskelyne; to be bequeathed or dealt with as she thought proper. Nor could Brian ever claim anything beyond the above-mentioned 1000*l.* in the shape of an annuity without power of anticipation. This pittance the testator considered just sufficient to give bread and plain meat to a Maskelyne who had lost caste: he did not wish to bequeath to such an one more. In the event

of Mrs. Maskelyne's death before any of these conditions were fulfilled, nearly the same powers were entrusted to certain trustees, whereof Seyton of Warleigh was the chief. But, in this last case, the property real and personal passed, so soon as the forfeiture should be complete, to the Maskelyne that chanced then to be the next of kin.

A strange will, no doubt ; yet, perhaps, neither were poor George Maskelyne's folly, nor his fair wife's ambition, so overweening as Marlshire gossips would have them. Looking back carefully at the records of Mote, you would possibly abate in your wonder. From its very origin there has brooded a curse over that ancient house—the curse of wilful misalliance. Like other hereditary diseases, it would leap over a generation or so—only to break out more fatally in the next.

Now the men who successively did this wrong to the family-honour, seemed impelled thereto by some temptation, not to be explained by reference to the general tenour of their lives.

There was the wicked favourite, whom the

fourth Edward loved—if he trusted not—right well; chiefly because he knew him to be more wild and reckless than himself: indeed, men said, that, whether in love or war, the kingly Belial could hardly keep pace with the meaner fiend. Is it not written—how Hugh de Maskelyne wedded the daughter of Sebastian the thievish Portingal scrivener, lustng more after her beauty than her gold; and how, two years later, he arose early from a debauch, and sate, with an evil laugh on his flushed handsome face, while his father-in-law was maimed and burnt in the pillory?

There was Richard Maskelyne; sworn boon-companion of Rochester and Etherege; known in all that set as the Devil's Dick; to whom Sedley indited the most blasphemous of his sonnets. Before his beard was grey, he took to wife the offspring of one of his own tenants; a buxom Blousalinda, who outlived all his brutality, and buried him at last, more decently than he deserved; though she professed herself heart-broken, before the honeymoon had waned.

Lastly—not to multiply examples—there was Brian's own grand-uncle Godfrey; whom the Regent, not unfrequently, named master of his revels; who would play any man for his estate, or any woman for her honour; one who, all his life long, had made a mock at every honest and holy thing—at matrimony most of all. It was more than a nine-days' wonder, when he placed a nuptial wreath on the false hair of an opera-singer, with a reputation more cracked than her voice, and who had made a science of infidelity. Be it recorded though, to La Signora's credit, that she forebore to palm on the family the mockery of an heir; so, the direct line was spared so much of shame.

Now, when it is considered that, in all human probability, these men could have compassed their desire at a far less costly price than the sacrifice of their name,—it being premised, too, that of all the commandments they notoriously least regarded the Seventh,—their aberration can hardly be explained, save on the ground of an hereditary malady: a pagan fatalist would have

absolved them at once, as unaccountable agents of a Nemesis.

With these examples, and many more, before his eyes, George Maskelyne signed his last will and testament. There was nothing of the domestic tyrant in his nature ; for he was a mild man, of weak constitution and studious habits, nervously anxious to please everybody, and devotedly fond of his only child. It is probable that his sole intent was, to keep Brian under watch and ward till the first folly of youth was overpast ; just like that Arabian king, who locked up his son in a lonely tower during the season marked out as fatal by the stars.

A wise and just precaution : did it ever once avail ? I trow not. The locksmith is yet to be born, whose bolts will baffle the cunning burglars —Love and Fate.

To return to that pair of innocent lambs. There is one other point to be noted about Bessie Standen.

In spite of her superb exterior, after the first glance, you become aware of an indefinable some-

thing, that forbids you to credit her with good birth or breeding; there is a want of the self-possession and self-reliance inherent in imperial beauty: in her bearing there is too much of defiance, in her eye too much of a challenge.

And—listen—the first words that fall from her red ripe lips, are not precisely drops of honey-dew.

“You need not have been so flurried, Brian; nor so anxious to hide me. I don’t believe your fine friend, whoever he was, had time, in this light, to recognise either of us. It’s rather early in the day, too—to feel ashamed of being seen with me.”

Brian looked her full in the face, with the earnest melancholy gaze that puzzled her uncomfortably, at times—with all her superiority in age and worldly wisdom.

“You’re quite wrong, Bessie,” he said gently. “There’s nothing ‘fine’ about Tom Seyton, as all Marlshire would tell you: if I had known who it was, at first, I should not have been so anxious to hide you; though he’s quite at home at Mote,

and may one day be my guardian. As for his not recognising us both—you don't know those hawk's-eyes of his as well as I do. But I don't think he would have the heart to betray me, even to my mother. You shouldn't taunt me with over-caution: prudence is hard enough to practise, even when you preach it. Ashamed—ashamed of *you*, my queen! What makes me as patient as I am—except looking forward to the day, when you shall carry your head as high as the haughtiest of them all? Darling, you're not like yourself to-night; or you would never have spoken so."

His voice shook a little as he ended, if the language was somewhat over-strained, as is often the case in boyish eloquence, it rang true as steel. Bessie Standen's shapely shoulder stirred once, impatiently; but—perhaps in spite of herself—she answered in a softened tone, with a tinge of banter in it notwithstanding.

"Poor child! *Was I* cross with it? See, I fold my hands and ask pardon—so prettily! And that was Mr. Seyton, was it? Perhaps he did

recognise me ; but, I dare say, you're right in trusting his discretion. Brian, dear, you mustn't mind my pettishness—I've been more worried at home of late than I can tell you. Yes. I know you'd help me if you could ; but you can't, just now, at all events. Only, you must not keep me another minute, I've stayed out too late as it is. I'll write, of course ; and we shall meet again very soon. There—just—one—no more.” (This sentence is rather hard to ‘stop’ correctly.) “You are not to follow me one step beyond the turn of the lane. I can perfectly well take care of myself.”

There was no second meaning intended in these last words ; yet her lover felt strangely conscious of their truth, as he watched the firm elastic footfalls, that carried Bessie Standen so swiftly away, through alternate light and darkness. As he turned slowly away from the trysting-place, he chid himself for feeling so depressed and melancholy ; but, surely, a man should be far advanced in middle-age, ere—even to his own conscience—he need give reason for every sigh.

Not having any special reasons for discretion, we will take leave to accompany yon fair damsel, even to her own fireside.

The first glimpse of the interior is not attractive. Whisky and strong Virginian tobacco are excellent things in their season—foul fall the faitor who would disparage either—but, consumed in large quantities when the day is young, they affect the bystander with a disagreeable sense of incongruity, and are apt to lay a heavy burden on the atmosphere. Bessie, apparently, was used to this sort of proceeding in her family circle ; for her fair face, as she entered, betrayed no disgust or surprise ; only, its expression that, during her homeward walk, had become somewhat softened and subdued, grew harder and more defiant, quickly—as silver tarnishes, passing through sulphuric fumes.

On one side of a fierce fire sate the master of the household—a handsome, large-framed man of the florid type, not so long ago ; but late hours and hard living have filled and marred the outlines both of face and figure, till, compared with

his former self, he looks like a coarse wood-cut by the side of a fine steel-engraving.

Mr. Standen had resided four years or so at Torrcaster, and of his antecedents absolutely nothing was known. He had no ostensible profession, unless constant attendance at all the principal race-meetings can be called such; but he had paid his way fairly enough so far, living very much at his ease in all respects, and keeping two or three useful horses in his stable. These he rode soberly, throughout the winter, with the Marlshire hounds; evidently looking out after business rather than sport; for he never negotiated a hurdle, unless a probable customer were near, in which case he would occasionally astonish the natives (who are not easily surprised) not a little, by a performance over stiff timber. For reasons best known to himself, he never allowed his beautiful Bessie to show in the hunting-field, though she rode boldly and gracefully.

Mr. Standen's was a very uncertain position; for the aristocracy, both of city and county, per-

sisted in ignoring his presence on all occasions, or, at the best, indulged him with the coolest nod; whilst he affected to consider himself, as above familiarity with the wealthy burghers. But he was not troubled with any acute sensibilities; and lived, to all appearances, contentedly enough in his narrow circle of acquaintance. This was made up of some half-dozen residents in Torr-caster—social anomalies like himself—and certain strangers of horsey exterior, who dropped in un-invited for a flying visit. His boon-companion, on the present occasion, was by far the most assiduous of these casual familiars.

Christopher Daventry's was rather a remarkable face. The upper part was nearly perfect; dense, well-pencilled brows arched themselves imposingly over a pair of keen black eyes, and the nose was really a study of delicate chiselling; but the mouth and chin spoilt all. In spite of an unusually luxuriant beard (which he cultivated, as if conscious of the defects alluded to), before ever he opened his lips, you felt that the man was cunning, and sensual, and cruel.

He was known among racing-men as “Kit, the Lawyer;” or the Lawyer, *tout court*; and, though he was scarcely turned of thirty, he had earned the *soubriquet* right well, by an extraordinary astuteness in picking his way through the miry labyrinths of turf-law. He sailed very close to the wind at times, so that his sails seemed shaking perilously; but, thus far, he had evaded both shipwreck and capture; though his movements were jealously looked after, in certain high quarters, just as a notorious privateer is watched by a neutral port-admiral. Once caught red-handed, the Lawyer knew right well what he had to expect—‘a short shrift, and a long rope.’

The unhealthy atmosphere—physically and morally speaking—of a gambler’s life, seemed to suit Kit Daventry’s constitution; that head was as cool and as hard as his heart, and equally proof against impression *ab extra*. On the present occasion, there was not a flush on his cheek, nor the faintest unsteadiness of hand, or tongue, or eye; though the signs of debauch were plain to read on the face of his seasoned

companion, and they had “drank fair” all through the afternoon.

Both the men nodded carelessly to Miss Stan-den as she entered; but only the younger spoke.

“Well, Bessie, what’s your best news? It’s time I were off; but I waited for the last tip from your training-ground. Did the colt go a strong gallop this afternoon? Don’t be shy about it.”

The voice was rather a pleasant one than otherwise, and devoid of any vulgarity of accent; indeed, people were often struck with the contrast between Kit Daventry’s tones, and the slanginess of speech in which he was prone to indulge.

The girl did not answer at once, but crossed the room with her quick decisive step, and came close behind the last speaker’s chair: she took off her coquettish little hat, and tossed it aside; shaking back, at the same time, the gorgeous masses of her golden hair, with a gesture of impatient weariness, that yet was not ungraceful. Any bystander must needs have been struck just

then with a certain family likeness between all the three ; nor was this wonderful ; for the man whose shoulder touched Bessie Standen's rounded arm, was her own first-cousin.

“ Shy ? ” she said, rather bitterly than angrily. “ It’s late in the day to talk of such things to *me*. But I’ve no news worth the telling. It’s the same old story—‘ Patience, only a little longer.’ I do so hate the part I’ve to play, and I began to hate myself to-day—don’t ask me why ; I don’t know, or care to know. And suppose it were all wasted—all the pain, and trouble, and shame. Don’t laugh, Kit. I won’t bear it ; it *is* shame—black and bitter—or *I* shouldn’t feel it.”

Daventry’s lip, that had begun to curl, set itself savagely, as Bessie ceased speaking, with a sob that she tried hard to stifle ; but, before he could reply, Mr. Standen’s thick, hoarse voice broke in : he stood rather in awe of his clever nephew ; and, save when far gone in drink, rarely ventured to beard him.

“ Leave the girl alone,” he said ; “ I won’t have her chaffed and bullied. It’s just like you—to

sit soaking and smoking there, and sneer at her when she comes in, after doing her best. Never mind him, Bessie dear ; we'll have the laugh on our side, when you're mistress of Mote. Don't you get down-hearted : it's a stake worth waiting for ; and even if the big *coup* don't come off, you'll always have a good name and a thousand a year to fall back upon. As for shame—that's my look out: it's no shame in you, to do your father's bidding."

The brief flush of anger that made his first words sound almost manly, faded as he was speaking ; the last were uttered in a querulous whine : of a truth he did look, just then, so very base and degraded, that—though ungrateful—it did not seem unnatural, when Bessie turned impatiently away from her partisan ; addressing rather the bolder villain.

"Do you hear him ?" she said. "As if a thousand a-year, with no expectations, would be any use to us ! Why, we spend more than that —living as we do." (Her glance, sweeping round the dingy room, spoke volumes of scornful com-

mentary.) "As for a name—it's worth to us what it's worth in the market—no more."

The Lawyer shrugged his shoulders, with the air of one who, having much the best of the position, has neither time nor inclination to quarrel.

"You're both more than half right, if you'd only drop your heroics. The big stake *is* worth waiting for, Uncle James; and I'm the last man alive to advise forcing the running. And, Bessie, I back you—so far; if you can't have Lombard Street, it's no use squeezing the orange dry. It's just possible, too, that the young one's name is as good now as ever it will be. I'm all for keeping things dark at present. No one saw you together to-day, Bessie?"

"No one, except Tom Seyton. I'm not much afraid of him; he's too simple to see any harm in innocent flirtation; and too good-natured to throw stones at butterflies. He don't give me credit for biting or stinging, I'm certain; indeed, I think, he rather admires me, in a distant, honest way."

Daventry's black brows contracted, till the double arches were nearly one.

"That's all you know about it," he said, rudely. "Why, you had better have done your love-making in the market-square, than in a corner where Tom Seyton could light on you. Good-natured and simple, eh? Listen, now. I was at Brentwood races two years ago, when there was a row about The Vixen being pulled; it wasn't half a bad case of roping; the mare ran forward enough to satisfy most people; but a few would have it that she never got her head loose. That kind-hearted fool of yours was the acting steward. Wrington, who owned and trained the mare, was had up in the Stand. I couldn't hear what was said; but I was near enough to see. I saw, by Wrington's face, that he was trying to laugh it off; and I saw Tom Seyton's set, all of a sudden, like a flint-stone. He did not make a long speech; but, before it was over, Ben was looking like a whipped hound. No wonder: he might as well have shot the mare, for all the use she's been since: they've stopped her with the weight in

every handicap, and the Club keeps a sharp look-out on the whole stable. That was Tom Seyton's work: he said he'd do it that day; and he kept his word. As for admiring you—you vain monkey—he hasn't an eye for a woman alive, except his own wife. He don't trust you far, either, depend on it; and he'd shoot Brian Maskelyne dead, sooner than see him married to Jem Standen's daughter."

"And the Lawyer's poor cousin"—the girl retorted; sweeping a saucy courtesy. "It's a pity to leave out any of my disqualifications. Well—it can't be helped now; we'll hope there's no harm done. I'm not going to quarrel. I felt rather inclined for it when I came in; but I find I'm too tired. I shall lie down, till I feel hungry: I suppose you dined hours ago. Don't lose your train, Kit. You won't shake hands? Good night, then. I hope you'll come back in a better temper!"

Daventry seemed determined not to notice her departure, though his countenance was rather thoughtful than sullen; but, as Bessie turned in

the doorway, he looked up, and met the full mocking light of her great blue eyes : his wicked face wore a curious smile, as he rose quickly, and followed her into the little hall without. For several minutes, Mr. Standen's head had sunk drowsily on his breast ; and he had taken no part in the family council with voice or ear.

“Hold on a minute, Bessie,” her cousin said. “Don’t let us part in the sulks. There’s been bother enough to-day, to cross a better temper than mine. What do you think of Linda’s breaking down badly, just after our money had gone on ? She couldn’t have lost at Gainsborough. I haven’t told *him* about it ; it’s no use. If you don’t dock his drink, he’ll get quite childish soon. We must get money to winter on now, by fair means or foul. Do you think the young one would put his name to paper ? It would ‘melt’ easily enough, though he is under age.”

These few words of careless kindness brought a softer look on Bessie Standen’s face, than her boy-lover had ever seen.

“Is it so bad as that” ? she whispered. “Well

—I must try, I suppose. But you won't make me speak to him, till there is really need? Something might turn up any day. And, Kit—you might give me a little more encouragement, instead of always taunting and scolding me. I do my best to please you. All other decoy-ducks are fed—sometimes at least."

Daventry stooped forward (tall as she was, she was the shorter by a head), and looked hard into her eyes, till his own shot forth evil gleams.

"What's the use of self-denial," he muttered, "when one gets no credit for it?"

And he kissed her thrice, passionately.

The girl took the caress, not eagerly, but with a quiet contentment, as a hard-worked sempstress might take her week's wages: she took it without a shade of shrinking or coyness; though on her lips, not an hour agone, was laid lightly and reverently, Brian Maskelyne's pledge of affiance.

The contrast was so great, that, if faith and honesty were silent, worldly wisdom might well have spoken loud in warning. On the one side there were—a pure chivalrous devotion, a high

social estate, an ancient and stainless name, to win ; on the other—

Bah ! It skills not talking of these things. It is the old story of the Eastern Queen. Sitting at the state banquet by the side of her fair young husband—with the choicest dainties of one hemisphere before her, and a thousand hearts panting to do her bidding—she only counts the minutes that shall bring her to the hovel of her swart, thick-lipped paramour, where her food will be garbage, her greeting, curses and blows.

Of all created beings, there is none more thoroughly disinterested than a woman, bent on casting herself away. Only—such self-sacrifices, instead of winning approving smiles from Heaven, must needs make merriment in Hell.

CHAPTER V.

PARCERE DEVICTIS.

THE general aspect of Marlshire is rather the reverse of mountainous ; indeed, its mild attempts at the picturesque are limited to diversities—not violently striking—of wood and water. But the natives have always been proud of their fertile champaign ; and rather disposed to pity than to envy the dwellers in the hill-country. Even where the ground rises gradually, so that, by a stretch of courtesy, it might be called an eminence, the spot seems to have had little attraction for the builders of aforetime ; it is in sheltered nooks and grassy hollows that most of the more ancient mansions are placed ; if you see a house otherwise situated, it is next to a certainty, that its foundation-stone is not a century old.

Warleigh was no exception to this rule. Lying

somewhat remote from the high road—you might have ridden within half a mile of its chimneys, without noticing them, unless the smoke-wreaths curling over the dense tree-tops caught your eye. The house itself was a low broad pile of building; rather attractive, architecturally, from its irregularity and grotesque confusion of styles—a very *olla podrida* in brick and stone. Only in the stables could you detect any unity of design; and these were evidently much more modern in date than any part of the mansion. Neither were the approaches in anywise imposing: the seventy-acre bit of grass-land, immediately round the house, looked more like a paddock than a park; near the gate, at one corner of this, stood a modest lodge; but it was evidently placed there rather for the gamekeepers' convenience (at the angle of a principal cover), than because a proud porter was considered necessary. Entering from the other side, you had to traverse a long range of meadows, and to open an uncertain number of gates for yourself.

But Tom Seyton's friends were used to this;

and—though they used to ask sometimes, “when that West Lodge was going to be built that he was always promising them”—they never expected that such an extravagance would be committed in *his* time.

The four leagues home from Torrcaster were done, as usual, under the hour that evening; but Minnie was champing her bit, and shaking her knowing head, quite gaily, when she slackened speed at the entrance of a green bridle-road, about a mile from her stable-door; it was simply from force of habit that she did this; for, unless under sore stress of weather or circumstances, Tom Seyton always brought his cattle in cool. He was in no especial hurry now; for he let the good bay mare have her own way, and rode slowly on, with slackened reins; evidently musing again. He unlatched the lodge-gate for himself, almost mechanically, and hardly raised his head to look around him, till he had passed under the archway of the stable-yard. But his reverie was very quickly broken, by the first words of the groom who came out to meet him.

"Please, sir, Mr. Vincent's come—not half an hour ago. You didn't leave no orders; so there was nothing to meet him at the station."

Seyton was as little given to outward signs of emotion as any old troop-horse; but he started very perceptibly now.

"Mr. Vincent come?" he repeated, in rather a bewildered way. "No, of course, I gave no orders. I hadn't a notion of his coming so soon. I'm very glad though."

These last words were spoken more to himself than to the groom. *Was* he really glad? He walked quickly across the yard, as if he cared not to take time to answer a misgiving.

There never breathed a more hospitable creature than Tom Seyton; the merest stranger was always welcome at Warleigh; he would have hated himself for ever if—even in thought—he had grudged entertainment to his Kate's own brother.

But adversity has its awkward, as well as its distressing, side; a great defeat, even though it

involve no deep disgrace, is more difficult to grapple with than a great sorrow.

They were heathens all ; trained in the flinty-hearted school of Lycurgus : yet was it not wholly against nature, when, in Sparta, after a disastrous battle, women knelt before the altar clad in bright raiment, with garlands in their hair ; while others sate at home in mourning garb, refusing to be comforted. The first were thanking the gods for the honour of their house kept safe, though their hearths were made childless for ever ; the last—making moan over sons, who had come back, to tell of lost or tarnished shields.

Besides this, the kindest natures are not always the readiest in condolence : so it was likely enough, that Seyton should feel rather aggrieved, at not having more time to prepare himself for encounter with the mighty fallen. In the other scale was to be set, the intense relief of finding himself no longer the first herald of evil tidings. On the whole, before he had crossed the stable-yard, Tom was nearly ready with his favourite common-place—“ It’s all for the best.”

Unless you passed through the offices, the nearest way to Seyton's own 'den' was through a postern-door, opening into a nook of turf, separated from the rest of the gardens by a tall hedge of clipped holly. The said den was a large, low room, with three windows looking out on the grass-plot, from which the sills were about breast high.

Those latticed casements were all a-glow just then; though no lamp or candle was lighted, the deep lurid glow from several burning oak-logs was quite enough, to throw out in strong relief the figure of a woman sitting on a deep rocking-chair, close to the hearth, with her back to the windows, and her head bent forward on her breast. You do not know that figure yet; but Tom Seyton did, right well.

"Poor pet!" he said, half aloud. "So they've sent her to ground, already."

Mrs. Seyton was accustomed—when beset by any doubt, or difficulty, or danger whatsoever—to 'head' at once for her husband's den (if he chanced to be absent it was just the same); on

such occasions it was almost impossible to prevent her ‘making her point ;’ and very difficult to dislodge her, till the tyranny was over-past.

She was either dozing now, or in deep thought ; for she never noticed the rustle of Seyton’s sleeve against the lattice ; but, though the passage was carpetted with thick matting over stone, she started up at the first sound of his foot within the outer door, and met him as he entered, with a smile on her face, still wet with recent tears.

“ Oh, Tom,” she said ; “ you know it all ? And you know he’s come ? ”

Before her husband answered a word, he wound his arm round the pretty speaker’s waist, and kissed her twice or thrice.

Many moons have waxed and waned since Tom Seyton brought his bride home to Warleigh ; but he is still prone to osculation as ever. Whether the subject under discussion be welcome or disagreeable—whether the sympathy expected from him be grave or gay—he invariably opens the proceedings of the Cabinet Council with this absurd ceremony ; which he would no more think

of omitting, than grace before meat. The number of matrimonial salutes that Tom must have fired in his time, is absolutely bewildering to think of; but the satisfaction of both parties concerned seems unabated; so it is best to leave them in their follies, especially as such are only committed *en champ-clos*.

There was no remarkable beauty in Kate Seyton's face, yet was it one of those on which the eye loves to linger; their attraction is rather hard to define; but it somewhat resembles that of a pleasant home-landscape, seen in the fresh light of early morning. It was a face to invite confidence—not familiarity, in the worst sense of the word. The muster-roll of her Marlshire friends, of high or low degree, might compare with that of any line regiment; but the county would have risen against you, to a man, had you hinted at a flirtation of Mrs. Seyton's. No wonder: he would be a very remarkable *roué*, who could speak of Kate and coquetry in a single breath, after one steady look into her clear brown eyes.

One hears of certain exceptional couples that 'were made for each other ;' surely, if there be such a thing as predestination in matrimony, it is exemplified in the case before us. In some respects, the characters of Kate and her husband seem moulded on identical lines.

Both have the same sensible straightforward way of meeting a difficulty—the same knack of cutting a tangled knot with an honest down-right blow—the same happy faculty of looking ever on the brighter side of life's changes and chances—the same simple tastes, and keen sense of innocent enjoyments. Indeed, though there is nothing masculine, or even amazonian, in Kate, she sympathises heartily with every one of her husband's favourite pursuits ; and is never so happy, as when by his side in the open air. She is a frequent guest throughout the winter at all the country-houses, great and small, within twenty miles of Warleigh ; and never—unless Lucina, by chance, forbid—misses a county ball. But the visiting-lists of Belgravia know not her name : she has never spent a whole fortnight in town

since she was presented, on marriage. When other women are setting their homes in order, for the duty-dinners and obligatory 'at homes' of the coming season, Kate is preparing to start for that famous Norse river, through whose eddies many a mighty *Salar* has rushed to his death, to the music of Tom Seyton's whirring reel; and over whose waters her own fly has fluttered—not always harmlessly. In the early days of her matron-hood, there was a slight difference of conjugal opinion on the point of her riding to hounds: she wished to do so without restrictions; to which Tom said, Nay, inflexibly. But Kate was soon persuaded that a man, going straight over the Marlshire country, has quite enough on his hands, without constant solicitude for a dearer safety than his own; so—with just a little sigh—she gave up her maiden-dreams of venatic glory, and resigned herself to judicious short-cuts, and rapid road-riding; 'throwing a modest *lep*' occasionally, when absolutely unavoidable. Even so, she sees more of a run than nine-tenths of the nickers and skirters; indeed, some elderly and timid sports-

men in these parts are very prone to follow that fair and cunning pilot.

I am not attempting to sketch a perfect character; so it costs me no pain to confess that, as a mother of a steadily increasing family, Mrs. Seyton was not wholly blameless; if its well-being had solely depended on her constant supervision, things would have gone hard with the nursery at Warleigh. Yet there was little or no selfishness in this seeming neglect; the fact was simply this: loving her children much, Kate loved her husband more; for years, he had been so perpetually foremost in her thoughts, that Tom's comfort and satisfaction had become to her almost the whole fulfilling of the domestic law. To be sure, her progeny thrrove so wonderfully, that there was little cause for maternal anxiety. The Dark Angel, whose wings had overshadowed other homesteads near, had thus far spared the 'young barbarians' of Warleigh. They grew up, noisily and merrily; regarding their mother, rather as a favourite playmate, than as a parent to be reverenced or obeyed: a most undecorous state of

things, certainly ; but convenient enough, while it lasted.

When you have marked, that, with all her ten years of matron-hood, Kate Seyton's figure is still temptingly taper and trim—her silky hair just as abundant, her step as elastic as it was at sweet sixteen—though tannage of wind and sun have darkened the early peach-bloom of her cheek into a clear ruddy-brown—you will have seen enough of the portrait of the Pet of Marlshire.

After the pause and preliminaries above-mentioned, came Seyton's answer.

“ Yes, child : I've heard that Vincent's come ; and I saw the ‘Times’ in Torrcaster. But I shan't know all, till I know how you and the Madre take it. I've been thinking of that, all the way home.”

“ I can hardly tell you, yet,” Kate said. “ It came upon us so very suddenly. We were sitting in the library, and never heard Vincent ring. He came in, all at once, and threw that dreadful Class-paper into mamma's lap, without speaking

one word. She was braver than could be expected—far braver than I could be; for I had to creep away here, almost directly, to have my ‘cry’ out.”

Her husband’s broad brow contracted; and his lip curled, somewhat scornfully.

“ Better than could be expected—you may well say that, my Kate. I never could see the pull of these stage-tricks in society; especially when women’s nerves are played upon. Why couldn’t Vincent tell his story like a man—instead of like an actor ? ”

“ Oh, Tom ! ” she broke in. “ You mustn’t speak so—even to me. You can’t think how beautifully he bears it.”

Seyton sat down in a convenient arm-chair; still clasping his wife’s waist in his arm, and drawing her pretty head closer to his shoulder. His face was very plain-spoken as a rule; it wore a quaint expression, now; wavering between provocation and amusement.

“ Bears it beautifully, does he ? Why, darling, to hear you, one would think Vincent was the

victim of some great treachery, or undeserved misfortune, at the very least."

Kate moved aside, rather pettishly; though she did not try quite to escape from the strong clasp that held her.

"And the examination *was* very unfair," she said. "I heard enough to be sure of that, before I came away. And it's too unkind of you—to begin to be sarcastic, just now."

The idea, of putting sarcasm and Tom Seyton into the same sentence! The self-evident absurdity almost upset the gravity of the accused; albeit, he was not naturally quick at taking a joke: he well-nigh laughed out loud.

"My darling; if I'm sarcastic, I'm like the man who talked prose without knowing it. I don't want to be unfeeling, either; only I can't help remembering that, when Vincent missed the Newdigate, you all clung to some story about the judges not looking through half the poems. What notions you must have of the corruption of Dons. They were a very fair and straightforward lot, in my time. And why should they have any

special spite against any one man ? Depend on it, they know nothing about 'nobbling favourites,' there. 'Whatever the game is—I'd rather hear the loser complain of luck than of foul play. It's the worst form out, if you can't prove your case.'

"I won't argue with you," Kate retorted ; and, this time, she drew herself quite free. "Wait till you've heard Vincent's story ; and then be as obstinate and incredulous as you please. Only—don't try to persuade mamma or me."

Tom Seyton dropped his head slightly ; shaking his ears the while, as you may see a high-couraged pointer do, when sharply chidden.

"You little vixen !" he said, as he rose. "I wouldn't contradict you again—alone ; much less with the Madre at your back. Stay here, whilst I go and see Vincent : it's best to get that over at once. I won't tease him, now or ever ; I promise you."

Quoth Tom to himself, as he crossed the hall—

"If poor Vincent failed in his logic-paper, the examiners must be much harder to deal with than the woman-kind at Warleigh."

The library was a long, narrow apartment; with four tall mullioned windows looking out on the principal flower-garden, and a deep oriel at the end. A bright, cheerful room by day—the profusion of dark oak book-cases, filled with dusky and dusty volumes, made it gloomy after nightfall; so that the family-party, sitting there of an evening, was fain to break up into groups; each creating for itself a little isle of light in the sea of shadow.

Only two reading-lamps were burning when Seyton entered; near one of these, at the further extremity of the room, close to the curtains of the oriel, the Victim and his mother sate together.

Mrs. Flemyng had been a remarkably pretty woman in her time; and her appearance might still have been very attractive, had it not been for a certain peculiarity of manner and address—so aggravating, even to disinterested strangers, that these were wont to marvel how the patience of her familiars held out.

Many years ago, in the pride and prime of her

beauty, some misguided admirer detected a striking resemblance between Mrs. Flemyng and a famous picture of St. Cecilia. The good lady—whose weakest point, then, was personal vanity—was intensely flattered, and resolved to profit by the discovery. Unfortunately her acquaintance with the biographies of the Calendar was rather limited and vague: she could not disassociate saintliness from suffering: so, ever since that unlucky day, she had considered it incumbent upon her to *poser en martyre*. Had she only done so outwardly, it would not have mattered so much; for—possessing, as she did, large plaintive eyes, shaded by long silky lashes—the effect was rather becoming; and, at the worst, could but have been wearisome from too frequent repetition. But, to such as realised that the attitude of meek resignation was moral, no less than physical, it was unexpressibly provoking.

For Mrs. Flemyng's path through life had been singularly smooth and straight: she had never known personal distress or difficulty: her one serious grief had been the loss of a husband

whom she loved after a discreet, dispassionate fashion ; and, ever since that event, her kinsfolk and relations had been as unanimous in comforting and consoling her widowhood, as if she had meditated social Sutteeism.

Notwithstanding these drawbacks, it was no wonder that she had many warm friends, or that her own family were so fond of her : she couldn't help looking injured ; but she never said a hard word to or of any living creature ; and was perfectly devoted to her children—carrying devotion, in her son's case, to idolatry.

As the fortunes of the said son form a main part of this veracious tale, it may be well to give him the advantage of a fair start, in a fresh chapter.

CHAPTER VI.

ICONOCLASM.

VINCENT FLEMYNG was strikingly like his mother: in his face all the best points of hers were reproduced—great delicacy and regularity of outline; dark expressive eyes; and a complexion very clear, though pale. It would have been nearly perfect, had it not been spoiled by an evident infirmity of purpose about the mouth, and a disagreeable expression alternately peevish and supercilious. It was eminently the face of a spoiled child: considering the circumstances, this was no wonder.

The family-worship of which Vincent Flemyng was the object, was centred on him at a very early age. Before he was eight years old, his mother and sister used to quote his witticisms to their familiars, as if the mantle of Selwyn or

Jekyll already rested on his shoulders ; albeit he had never uttered anything above the commonest level of boyish banter ; which, as is well known, depends entirely on the retort—more or less uncourteous. Vincent lost his father very early : whatever other sins of omission that easy-going divine may have had on his conscience, it would not be fair to hold him in anywise responsible for the faulty education of the son. It may be supposed, that Mrs. Flemyng would be extremely loth to send her darling adrift on the troubled waters of public-school life : but she was peculiarly unlucky, as it turned out, in her choice of a tutor. An honest, plain-spoken man, with some strength of will and principle might have done wonders for the boy ; who was anything but bad-hearted *au fond*.

But the Reverend James Redland was simply a selfish Epicurean ; with just enough of worldly wisdom to be tenacious of a comfortable berth, when once fairly established therein. He was indolent, too, to a miracle : you might see him, often, basking in the sun in summer, or before a

fierce fire in the winter, with an empty pipe between his lips ; because he was too idle to rise and fill it. It was far less trouble to float upon the tide of feminine enthusiasm, than to try to stem or turn it into a juster channel : not actually prompting the rhapsodies of the devotees—he sealed them with a mute consent, and a smile, that was always ready, if sometimes cynical. Yet, with all his faults, Mr. Redland was a brilliant scholar : he had taken high honours at the University in spite of that incorrigible indolence engrained into his nature ; and still kept up his reading in a desultory amateur sort of way ; finding familiar classical ground much easier travelling, than any of those modern works of fiction that involved a mental grapple with their plot.

Thus it befel that, when Vincent Flemyng, at the mature age of thirteen, went up for his preliminary examination at the great public school of _____, he was found very much forwarder than the average of his comrades, and was highly placed accordingly ; so highly, indeed, that he

sat down at once ‘above the salt,’ as far as fagging was concerned.

Strange to say—even in that new phase of life, the spoiling process went on, steadily.

Jack Gratrex, undisputed Cock of the school (and—if his admirers were to be believed—of half the country beside), was in the same house, and at once spread over Vincent the shadow of his seven-fold shield. Jack said—“he knew the Fleyngs at home ;” which was true : it was also true that, at the bottom of his big boyish heart, he nourished a hopeless Cymoniacal passion for the pretty Kate. Anyone seriously molesting her brother would have fared, under those brawny hands, not much better than did the groom, who smote Lufra, the gaze-hound of the Douglas. It was rather hard on Jack, that his simple chivalry was never called into play ; for his protégé soon began to win an independent popularity.

Even at that time —— was a very famous school : the personal influence and characteristics of the wise strong-willed man, who was then the fountain-head of authority seemed to filtrate

through the whole system, with the happiest results: in those days, there came forth from the gates under the square grey towers, many brilliant scholars; but more sound Christians, and right-minded gentlemen. But the purely aristocratic element was very scantily represented there; and—as it is invariably the case in communities so constituted—stood at a proportionate social premium.

I cannot see that ‘flunkeyism’ is necessarily involved in such a state of things; though this apparent contradiction has been a stock-joke against all democracies, since the world was young. If our American cousins are apt to be extravagant in their lionization of a lord, it might be remembered that such an apparition, in flesh and blood, has, till lately, been scarcely more common, out there, than that of a Choctaw chief or Nepaulese ambassador within the Four Seas. It strikes me, *we* have bowed down, in our time, before a Bahadoor or so, whose moral characters would bear no close inspection. Advantage of birth is like any other rarity, after all: it may

well have an attraction in divers places, wholly independent of any intrinsic excellence in the possessor.

However this may be, it is certain that the 'blue blood,' faintly leavening the honest lump of the Third Estate was highly, if unconsciously, valued at ——: neither was title, or an honourable prefix, indispensable.

When the merits of different public-schools were first discussed, Mrs. Flemyngh was strongly for Eton; and the scale was only turned in favour of —— by the advantage of comparatively near neighbourhood, and by the fact of a near kinsman being an influential Governor on the Foundation. Her son had reason, in some respects, to congratulate himself on the choice. The Flemynghs came of a good old stock; though the family had never, at any epoch, been very wealthy or powerful. Vincent's appearance—at least, at this time of his life—was much in his favour: he was not only a handsome specimen of the 'pretty page' class; but showed blood in all his points, from head to heel. The future cottonocrats and coal-

owners began, almost at once, to cherish—if not to court—a creature evidently cast in a more delicate mould than their own. Before the first quarter was over, Vincent Flemyngh could count a score or so of adherents, all older and stronger than himself; only too ready to fetch and carry for him (morally speaking); and to humour, to the uttermost, his boyish petulance and caprice. Just so, in the early decadence of French monarchy, one might have seen the *hobereaux* of his native province, ministering to the insolence of some beardless court-minion—exiled, for awhile, from the royal Paradise of Sin.

So things went on, till in the last year of his school-life Vincent Flemyngh did really register a substantial triumph, by winning the English Verse prize. If there was acclamation among his partisans at —, judge how it fared with the woman-kind at home. They could scarcely have made more rejoicing, if their boy had carried off the Golden Violet, from a congress of all the poets of the age. Kate read out the poem, over and again, to her insatiable mother; and they

both agreed, that they had never heard anything so musically sonorous as those turgid decasyllables ; though, even an article in the ‘ Weekly Growler ,’ would have sounded rhythmically harmonious—declaimed in those fresh, round, youthful tones.

One way or another, Vincent Flemyng went up to Oxford, with more than ordinary *prestige* ; and there, too, the chances of time and season helped to make the way comparatively smooth before him.

There are, of course, cycles and reactions in University life, no less than in the big work-day world ; if they recur more rapidly, in the former case, this only seems natural—comparing the span of academic existence with that of man’s generations. For three years immediately preceding Flemyng’s [matriculation, there had prevailed at Ch. Ch. a hard-riding, hard-drinking set ; much given to athletics of all sorts, and not a little to rough practical joking. These men carried their faults and failings, openly, at least ; and, though they vexed the soul of the Dons with

many misdeeds, perhaps even to the worst of the lot, the formula of a famous horse-dealer might have been applied—"Light-hearted beggars; without an ounce of vice about them." This set had gradually died out; a few of its members having finished their appointed course; more—having come to violent academical ends. The Tufts and Velvet-caps, who fell naturally into the vacant high places, formed, in every respect, the strongest contrast to their predecessors.

Muscularity — Christian or otherwise — went utterly out of fashion; Della Cruscan indolence and elegant cynicism, were affected rather by these beardless Coldstreams; who, before they had well glanced into the world's crater, were ready to aver that "There was nothing in it." If in any wise they departed from their rule of Quietism, it was only in the elaborate ornamentation of their rooms; and, even here, show was made quite subordinate to costliness. The time-honoured hunting scenes, and 'Pets' of all sorts were a perfect drug in the market; but the demand for (so-called) rare and curious engravings

was sufficient to start a new and enterprising print-seller. On the morning of a very special fixture of the Heythrop or Old Berkshire, you might perchance see three or four 'pinks' lounging slowly forth, past the scandalized porter; evidently careless as to the chances of being late for the meet: but, usually, a dilatory constitutional, late in the afternoon, was about the hardest work of the clever hacks that most of these men owned. The Drag and The Bul-lingdon both languished in their respective seasons; and were scarcely, by force of tradition, kept from utter extinguishment. No rattling choruses, or discordant horns, or salvos of pyrotechnic artillery, disturbed the midnight propriety of the inner quadrangle; if lights burned later than ever in those silent rooms, where oak was sported so early, that was, surely, only the affair of their tenants.

Indeed—though it was part of their creed to ignore politely all laws, human or divine—it was rare, that any one of the set contravened openly the college regulations. Nevertheless, as time

went on, evil whispers got abroad. It was noticed that the old set, after their noisiest orgies, never wore such haggard morning-faces as certain of the Quietists, after the decorous revels, wherein nothing stronger than iced sherbet, or the mildest Badminton, was consumed; also, there were rumours—still more vague—of a case or two in the neighbourhood of the city, much blacker than the average of academic profligacies. It was long before such reports reached the ears of the authorities, in any tangible shape; but some of the more clear-sighted tutors—wise and moderate men, yet carrying their ideas of duty beyond the doors of a lecture-room—felt an uneasy consciousness of an unhealthy state of things, and were inclined to wish the Roysterers back again, in the room of the Deadly Smooths.

Yet—whatever the leaders might have been—it would have been unfair to impute to the generality of the set a deliberate vice, or indeed anything worse than boyish affectation. In truth—as is the wont with budding philosophers of any

school—they took a one-sided view of their favourite models. They forgot the strong daring manhood, which has lain at the bottom of the fantastic follies of hero-coxcombs in every age. Taking, for instance, the prototype of all the class ; they thought of Alcibiades — curled, odorous, and purple-clad — walking daintily through the Agora, or leaning on Timandra's breast ; never remembering, how often he had borne the brunt of battle, from the day when Socrates bore him out of the rout, to that winter's night, when he leapt out to meet his murderers, his long hair all a-flame ; when they —being two hundred to one—dared not wait the onset, but, standing afar off, wrought the bidding of Pharnabazus with Bactrian bows.

Into this set—partly from bent of character, partly from family connections—Vincent Flemyng fell quite easily and naturally : very soon, indeed, he began to be reckoned amongst its chiefs ; though—comparing his resources and expectations with those of most of his familiars —it was the old story repeated, of earthenware

floating alongside of iron. There was a pleasant fiction current among the Quietists, to the effect, that each and every one of their number was capable of almost anything, if he only chose to try. Ere long, it began to be whispered abroad that Flemyngh did choose; and that he meant going in seriously for honours. In those days, Moderations were unknown; Smalls—the only trial stakes before the great race for three-year-olds—told no tales. Thus, so many horses started dark, that it was no wonder, if some rank impostors were made hot favourites, and enjoyed a vast amount of prospective fame, up to the very hour when they were proved worthless.

It is very difficult to choke off university partisanship; and, nowhere else, can so much credit be established on hearsay. When Vincent Flemyngh went in for the Newdegate, and failed, his backers were disgusted, but not discouraged; they laid the fault, anywhere but at the right door; and the unconscious examiners were accused of every species of judicial delinquency,

from bad taste, down to prejudice and supineness.

Nevertheless, in any assemblage of true believers there will be found a sprinkling of covert or avowed heretics. If Flemyng's own tutor was beguiled into over-confidence, by the showy scholarship and imperturbable self-reliance of his pupil, others were more sceptical.

The Earl of Tantallon was at the same college; training coolly and sedulously for the political career, in which he has long ago won great fame; he was too cold and proud—perhaps, too busy—to identify himself with any especial set; but he saw a good deal of Vincent Flemyng, and heard more. Whenever the latter's name was mentioned admiringly, the Earl's fine eyebrows would arch themselves; and his thin upper-lip would curl slightly; incredulity, could not be more politely, or more decidedly implied, as many a baffled diplomatist has since had occasion to acknowledge.

Taking almost the other extremity of the social scale; there was Jock Hazeldean,—son of a

Cumbrian sheep-farmer; with the spirit of Porson, in the carcase of Kinmont Willie—who read and rowed, and drank (by fits and starts) harder than any man of his year: he would pitch Aristotle into a corner, and put on the gloves for ten minutes, whenever he could find a customer; and return, to floor the Stagyrite, with equal science and satisfaction. The big Borderer could in nowise abide the Quietists; and utterly declined to believe in their champion: it was hardly safe to sound his praises in that savage presence. Jock would begin to glower; and shake his shaggy black head like a bull preparing to charge; and growl out, in his roughest burr:—“He be d—d. Saft, arl through!”—or words equally rude and disparaging.

Now both these men had some right to speak; for both took the highest classical honours, the year before Flemyngh went in. The peer’s was a good, steady, laborious First; Hazeldean’s—one of the most brilliant on record. His *viva-voce* translation of certain tough bits in Aristophanes is still talked of in the Schools; he had mastered

the passages so completely that he was able actually to appreciate their humour ; and, when the laughing examiner put him on repeatedly, it was as much to gratify Jock, as the Dons who crowded the gallery.

Well—it was all over now ; no room left for hopes, or fears, or prophecies, or for excuses : truth to speak, the backers of the favourite had not even the old poor consolation—‘he was beaten, not disgraced ;’ for they had not even a fair run for their money.

Some men, under similar circumstances, would have brazened out their discomfiture ; others—more rare stoics, these—would have accepted it with utter outward indifference. But Vincent Flemyng was not audacious, nor—in spite of natural and assumed *poco-curanteism*—cool enough, to take either of these courses. He left Oxford by an early train on the morning after the Class-list was published, and all the previous evening had secluded himself in his own rooms ; declining to see the face of either friend or foe. He had had time enough though,

to learn—or re-learn—his lesson, during his journey into Marlshire.

So, when Seyton first saw his face, the old languid superciliousness was there; though it might be a shade paler than usual.

“How are you, Vincent? I’m glad you’ve come straight here; though I’m right sorry for the cause. Perhaps you don’t care to talk about it, just now?”

Tom spoke cheerily and heartily, as was his wont; yet, somehow, as the two shook hands, even a stranger might have guessed there was little cordiality between them.

“Thanks,” Vincent answered. “You’re always very kind. But there’s little enough to tell; and that little I was trying to explain to my mother. I was very unlucky in my papers.”

“So Kate said: but she didn’t seem quite to know how that came about.”

The other man’s face lowered and darkened: he did not fancy being cross-questioned, even when it was easier to answer than now.

“It’s simple enough,” he said, after a second’s

hesitation. “The examiner, who set the logic and science papers, is at daggers-drawn with my tutor; they’re always quarrelling: he took good care to puzzle Leighton’s pupils.”

“And were all his pupils equally unlucky?”

Seyton could not for his life refrain from that awkward home-question; but he was sorry he had spoken, before the words were well uttered; for he saw that the maternal martyr was already calling Heaven to witness against his unsympathetic hardness of heart. Indeed, under ordinary circumstances, that good dame—though she loved him as her own child—had a way of looking at Tom, as if he were one of her many trials.

Vincent Flemynghad a certain facility of excuse and evasion; but the gentle instincts that were born with him were strong and vivid still: he had never in his life told a direct lie. So he answered, now, straightforwardly enough; though the slow, sullen syllables came, one by one, through his set teeth,

“Leighton had one First, and three Seconds.”

Then came rather an embarrassing pause,

during which Mrs. Flemyngh's hand stole into her son's, and drew him gently down to his old place by her side; while Tom felt more guilty than ever.

"Some horses can win under any weight," he muttered at last, half apologetically. "Well, I dare say there *is* a good deal of luck in these things. I didn't mean to worry you, Vincent; but I'll leave you to the Madre again now. I've several things to do before dinner, and the dressing-bell will ring in ten minutes. They'll make you comfortable, of course, in your old room."

So Seyton took himself off to his own den, with the pleasant conviction of having utterly mismanaged the first interview.

"I muffed the whole thing, Kate," he said. The kind little woman forbore to ask him another question.

Dinner went off much better than could be expected; but the ladies had scarcely left the room, when that unlucky Tom—whose evil star was ominously high that evening—contrived to bring on a fresh *imbroglio*.

“What are your plans, Vincent?” he asked, innocently; wishing to give the conversation a turn, quite away from the recent troubles.

“I shall go to Rome almost immediately,” was the answer; “and stay there some months, at least. I’ve been thinking—yes—before this week —of taking up painting as a profession. It would suit me as well or better than any other, I dare say.”

The vague recklessness of the reply—to say nothing of a subtle contemptuousness of tone—grated unpleasantly on Seyton’s ear. Besides this, he was not free from certain old-fashioned prejudices. Admiring both art and literature in his simple way, he could not divest himself of the idea, that the professors of either must be more or less affiliated to the Brotherhood of Bohemia. He drew his lips together; evidently suppressing with difficulty the long low whistle that always, with him, betokened vexation and surprise.

“You know your own mind best, of course,” he said, after a pause, “and your chances of success, too; but surely it’s a pity you didn’t think of all

this two or three years sooner. It might have saved much time, and—money. Look here, Vincent; I haven't said a word to the Madre (though perhaps [it's more her affair than mine]), nor to Kate either; but Deacon told me, when I saw him in town, that you had been selling out heavily within the last six months. He didn't say how much, and I didn't ask him; but it was enough to make him look very grave. I do hope, it was to settle *all* the Oxford ticks. I know they mount up, like the very devil, at the end of the third year; and, no doubt, it's wisest to clear everything off at a sweep."

Vincent Flemyngh felt very angry—too angry to preserve his habitual supercilious *sang-froid*—too angry to avail himself of the avenue of escape, left in his brother-in-law's last words. As he spoke, he crushed a walnut to shivers in the crackers, with a vicious emphasis that could not be mistaken.

"Deacon's an old fool, and an old woman into the bargain; or he wouldn't talk of his client's affairs to people whom they can't in the least

concern. I shall get some one else to manage my business in future. I don't choose to be questioned on matters, for which I am accountable to no one alive. It will be time enough to trouble my mother, when I ask her for money."

Tom Seyton had an invariably good temper. He was also specially indulgent to the irritations of sorrow or adversity ; and had the highest idea of courtesy at his own table ; but—with all this given in—it was hardly safe to abuse an absent friend in his presence.

" You're not yourself just now," he said, sternly. " Yet that's no excuse for words like these. Deacon *is* an old man—old enough to have known your father and mine, and to have been trusted implicitly by both. But there's not an honester heart, nor a clearer head, within a mile round Lincoln's Inn. I don't think the threat of withdrawing your business would frighten him. He'll throw it up of his own accord, if you give him much more of such work to do. Perhaps he is rather behind the world, though ; for it never

struck him, when talking to your sister's husband, that he was talking to an outside stranger."

Tom checked himself here, with a valiant effort (for he was in a very unusual heat of temper) ; and went on in a much milder tone.

" Well—don't let us quarrel, Vincent. If it's only for the women's sake, we're bound to keep the peace. Of course you're out of leading-strings long ago. I only spoke as I would have done to any other old friend of mine ; and because I'd do a good deal to save you from getting into trouble ; and more still—I tell you frankly—to save sorrow to your mother or sister. But I'm fated to put my foot into it. If you won't have any more claret, shall we go into the library ? Kate has hardly had a glimpse of you yet."

Now—though Flemynghad carried the thing off with rather a high hand, and had not had much the worst of it in that brief passage of arms—it did occur to him, when the first petulance of anger had passed away, that it might have been wiser to take Seyton's hints in the spirit in which they were evidently offered. He had no present

or pressing embarrassments to fear ; nevertheless —bluster and brazen it as he would—he could not shake off the stubborn fact, that a huge cantle of his patrimony had gone, to pay off play-debts, incurred in a few of those ‘quiet’ evenings above alluded to ; leaving the majority of the trade-accounts still unsettled.

On entering the library, Seyton made straight for his own peculiar arm-chair ; and took, as it were, a ‘header’ into the pages of a famous sporting serial, that had arrived in the course of the day ; he did not come fairly to the surface during the remainder of the evening. It was an unusually interesting number ; narrating how the hero, on that notorious savage The Cannibal, utterly vanquished and cut down the cracks of Roundaboutshire ; and—after selling his mount for a fabulous sum to one of the flyers of the hunt—won back the animal, with a hatful of money besides, at chicken-hazard. Nevertheless, these stirring adventures did not so entirely engross the reader, as to make him insensible to two separate aggravations.

The first was, a consciousness that those three talking low at the farther end of the library, had not—for the moment—one single feeling in common with him, Tom Seyton. To be sure, Kate did, ever and anon, cast certain conversational scraps in his direction ; but this was, evidently, more to prevent her husband from feeling himself entirely an alien and outsider (perhaps, too, a little to ease her own conscience), than because she wanted or expected him to join them. The second thorn in Seyton's side was this. He had his own opinion, as you know, as to how far Fortune was to blame in the recent disaster. So, it was sufficiently provoking to be aware, that the victim was being loaded with about the same amount of pity and comfort and cherishment, as might fairly be awarded to some valiant invalid, who has brought back wealth of bloody honours from a fair foughten field.

On the whole, it was one of the least remunerative evenings that Tom ever spent at his own fireside ; nor was it great wonder if, rather before his usual hour, he betook himself to his own den ;

where Kate—more than half contrite now—found him, shrouded in smoke-wreaths, dense enough to make their brief peace-making almost an invisible performance.

CHAPTER VII.

MORNING BRINGS COUNSEL.

Then sleep on, my baby,
And rest while you may ;
For strife comes with waking,
And sorrow with day.

So, if I remember aright, ran the lullaby that I once heard crooned over a cradle. It seems to me, to contain more of false sentiment, than is allowable, even in nursery rhymes. If the night has closed upon some bitter sorrow, a gross folly, or black disaster, the first waking moments are, in themselves, half an atonement ; but these moments must have been exceptional even in *his* life, on whose sepulchre was graven the one ghastly word — MISERRIMUS. Few there are, of sound mind and body, who will not own, that there is no such moral tonic as a morning break-

ing freshly and brightly. Every one knows the ending of Longfellow's ballad, that begins—

I have read in some old marvellous tale,
Some legend old and vague,
How a legion of spectres, wan and pale,
Beleaguer the walls of Prague.

The gentle poet-philosopher [never drew an apter or truer parallel.

Tom Seyton would have felt almost as much ashamed of waking, sad or sorry, as of waking with a racking headache; either must have been induced by an excess over-night of one kind or another, and Tom was more temperate than most of his convivial turn. He had nearly forgotten the small crosses and vexations of the previous evening, when he came down to his early breakfast; indeed, Kate, albeit well used to minister to his appetite, could not forbear bantering her husband on his remarkable prowess that morning. Not very often, between August and April, was Seyton present at the first family meal; which was at Warleigh rather an irregular and uncertain affair, determined much by the individual tastes

of the guests. Mrs. Flemyn always breakfasted late, and disliked breakfasting alone: so Kate humoured her mother, of course; though she would much have preferred sharing Tom's grill, instead of simply pouring out his tea.

Seyton had not much time to spare, on this particular morning; for Wrotham Lings, where he was bound to shoot, lay twelve long miles away; and the owner of that famous cover considered its annual beating in the light of a solemn festival or sacrifice, to which only a few favoured initiates were bidden: if one of these had been a minute late, of a surety he would that hour have lost his grade, and been reduced to the ranks of the outer profane for ever. Nevertheless, Tom did manage to appear in the breakfast-room, just as Vincent Flemyn lounged listlessly through the opposite door—with the air of a man who has no interest whatever in what is set before him; and considers appetite, rather a plebeian weakness.

“You won’t mind my leaving you?” Seyton asked, as soon as the greetings were over (rather prolonged on the part of the sister and mother).

“ Kate can do the honours of the stable just as well as I ; you can ride anything that’s fit, of course. You don’t hunt ; so it’s of less consequence, that the hounds are the other side of the country to-day. But it’s a pity you don’t care for shooting ; it would be such a rare day for the warren, and we’ve hardly put a ferret in yet. Won’t you take Haynes there, for an hour or two ? ”

Vincent Flemyngh turned on his brother-in-law his wonted look of supercilious languor ; yet a keen observer might have detected in his glance a covert scrutiny.

“ Thanks, very much,” he said ; “ but the warren won’t tempt me. I should be glad, though, if you could lend me a quiet hack—warranted not to pull. I rather think of going over to Charteris Royal.”

They were insignificant words enough, and very negligently spoken ; but eyes, less watchful than Kate’s, might have seen a doubt and trouble cloud her husband’s face ; his assent came, after a pause, with undissembled reluctance.

“ You can ride the Kitten, of course ; and I’ll answer for her giving you no trouble. But it’s a longish pull from here, and you can’t get back till after dark. Or, stay—if you must go, won’t you take Kate with you ? She owes them a call, I know.”

Vincent Flemyngh’s smooth white brow could lower sullenly enough, if anything thwarted his humour ; such was evidently the case just now. But Kate struck in with the ready partisanship of womanhood, before her brother could answer.

“ That’s so like you, Tom. I never knew you remember any except shooting engagements. You forget that the Martyns come here to luncheon to-day ; though *you* asked them. I shall have to do a long hour’s penance, for your flirtations with that tremendous florist, while she criticizes my poor conservatory. As for the ride—it’s not a bit farther for Vincent than it would be for me ; and what has the dark got to do with it ? I’m sure he knows every inch of the road.”

Among other characteristics of the female special-pleader, you may remark that, if part of

her case be rather weak or suspicious, she is fond of bringing in—more or less irrelevantly—certain truisms or incontrovertible propositions. In this target, if her antagonist be not exceeding cunning of fence, the fair gladiator will catch several thrusts, that would be hard to parry with her blade.

There was sense in Kate's remark, certainly ; indeed, in her last words there was rather a redundancy of truth. And so her husband seemed to think, as he muttered below his breath—

“ Yes, there's no doubt of that : he knows the road well enough : a turn *too* well, for that matter.”

Luckily for the peace of the community, not even Kate's quick ear caught the sense of the murmur : and, while Tom paused, still somewhat irresolute, Mrs. Flemyngh's gentle plaintive voice was heard.

“ I'm very glad you are going over to Charteris, Vincent, dear. I've two or three messages to send to Marion, besides a monogram for her velvet-work. I think the young men of this day are far too apt to be idle about calling, and to

forget their old friends. *You'll* never follow that fashion, darling, I'm sure."

And the excellent lady glanced around her—a ray of satisfaction beaming through the habitual twilight of meek long-suffering—as who should say—

"See: among my many trials, I am still alive to the comfort, of having borne a considerate and high-principled son."

Honest Tom Seyton could hold his own well enough with the outer world; but in the bosom of his own family, he was essentially non-combatant. Seeing the state of the odds against him, he utterly declined further contest; and gave up the point with an expressive shrug of his broad shoulders—as he had given up many another.

All this time, you will observe, that the person principally interested in the question had spoken never a word. The reason was simple enough. "Do nothing for yourself that others will do for you"—was one of the prime tenets of Flemyng's life-law. So soon as he perceived that his sister

and mother were ready to fight his battle, it no more occurred to him to interfere, than it would have occurred to our Iron Duke to lead the stormers at Badajoz. Nor was he in anywise grateful for the timely succour: he had come to think that it was the duty—if not the privilege—of his womankind to take all possible trouble off his own imperial hands; accepting such service, as a matter of course, with the impassible serenity of a Cheddar dairy-farmer, or Sioux brave.

So Vincent sate silent, and somewhat sullen, till Seyton's face showed plainly enough that no further opposition was to be feared: then he came, languidly, to the front again.

“ Well, I suppose it's settled then? As I've rather a fancy for going to Charteris Royal to-day, and as it seems to please mamma, and as you're sure the Kitten will carry me safely, Tom,—perhaps you'll be kind enough to order her, when you start? I should like to get over there by luncheon-time. Of course, I'd rather have had Kate's company; but, it seems that's out of the question.”

He smiled as he spoke ; and the low soft voice inherited from his mother sounded musically ; yet, both in voice and smile, there was overmuch of sneer.

There was something so intensely cool, in the way in which the speaker took everything for granted, that Seyton, in the midst of his vexation, was almost moved to laughter.

“ You’ve settled it among you, certainly,” he said. “ After all, Vincent, if you choose to take a long, lonely ride, it’s more your affair than mine. There’s the cart coming round ; I’ve not another minute to spare. I’ll order the Kitten for you in an hour ; for Heaven’s sake, take care of her knees. Kate—I want to say three words to you, before I start.”

No stronger proof could be given of Tom’s inward discontent, than that simple caution. He was fond of his horses, but liberal to a fault in lending them.

Amicus equus, sed magis amicus hospes ;

might have been carved over his stable door.

Now—perhaps, for the first time in his life—he mounted a guest, with a warning. His last words to Kate in the hall were brief enough; but spoken with a grave earnestness, very unusual with Tom Seyton.

“ See, child—I don’t want to be uncharitable. I hate scandal as I do the devil; and I’m the last man alive to spoil fair sport. But I don’t think, all the fooling that went on over yonder last autumn, comes under that head. If it’s to begin again, I’ll have neither lot nor part therein. You needn’t tell me ‘ there’s no real harm in it.’ It’s harm enough—to set all the idle tongues in the country going.”

Dearly as Kate loved her husband, and careful as she was, never deliberately to run counter to his will, she was rather disposed to underestimate his capacity; and scarcely gave credit enough to the strong, clear, common-sense that rarely led him astray. In trifling debates she was apt to side with the opposition, till she saw that Tom was seriously interested; on appreciating which state of things, she would ‘ rat’ with a

promptitude rarely equalled, even in domestic polities.

To do her justice, she had not considered the present question, as one of any real moment whatever. Not till her husband spoke these last few words, did she understand that his scruples and apprehensions were fairly roused : all at once, in spite of her hero-worship of Vincent, it flashed across her that Tom might possibly be right after all.

Her heart smote her as she answered, with a nervous laugh ; looking up, the while, into her husband's eyes rather anxiously.

“ You dear old goose ! I hope you are talking of what you know nothing about. But I'm so sorry, you're vexed. If I had only known, you——”

Seyton cut the contrition short, after his usual fashion ; and the light was on his face again ; as he bent it to the farewell salute.

“ Don't worry, pet ; ” he said, cheerily. “ Perhaps I'm disquieting myself, and you, all in vain. But Vincent is past boyhood, now ; and the fair

lady, yonder, has very little prudence—or principle, either, I fancy—inside her handsome head; and John Charteris has neither hands nor nerve to drive a skittish one—even if he would take the trouble to try. It's just as well Vincent is going to Italy. Mrs. Charteris will have some one else on hand, before he has been gone a month—that's one comfort. Meanwhile, I wish him luck with his adieus, and I hope he'll get them over quickly."

Tom's foot was on the hall-steps as he spoke the last words; and, in two minutes more, he had turned the bend of the avenue. It is most certain that he carried no troublesome misgivings with him; for he had never been in better spirits nor in better shooting form, than he was on that day—a red letter one, even for Wrotham Lings. His performance at one especial corner—where he stood side by side with a famous shot from the North-country, in a hollow that gave the rocketers good twenty yards' advantage—astonished the stranger not less than it gratified the natives.

But Kate watched her husband rather wistfully till he was quite out of sight: as she turned into the house she sighed once, audibly; and the shiver that ran through her pretty shoulders came not all from the keenness of the winter air.

An hour later, Vincent Flemyn, attired in riding gear, a thought too gorgeous for winter travel, took the road, carrying his mother's commissions, and her tacit blessing. Not seldom—if history speak sooth—have as eminent Christians wished a worse errand, 'God-speed.'

While the Kitten bears him smoothly and swiftly over fifteen miles of dreary level road, it may be well to say a few words, concerning Charteris Royal and its tenants.

CHAPTER VIII.

CHARTERIS ROYAL.

FOR many and many a year has that great house stood in the foremost rank of the stately homes of England. The county Gazetteer (though the estate stretches far into Marlshire, the mansion is pitched a long league over the Chalkshire border), soars into eloquence whilst dilating on the glories of the demesne, and the treasures of the galleries and state-rooms. Yet, a critically artistic eye would find little to rest on admiringly. The park is vast enough, certainly; it has never been contracted since the day when (*vide* the Gazetteer again) Queen Bess coursed a stag for two full hours within the boundary-wall; but it has few natural advantages, save a wealth of immemorial trees; for the flat Marlshire cham-

paign encroaches here on the neighbouring county to the verge of the far horizon.

Neither is there anything especially imposing about the mansion itself; though it is placed judiciously enough on the likeliest swell of rising ground, and backed by a darkling mass of woodland. There are some houses—some men and women too—that even length of years cannot make venerable. Charteris Royal was one of these. Without, the eye of the antiquary roved over a huge heavy pile of Gothic architecture, till it grew satiate and weary; without lighting on a single coign of relief, where some quaint delicate fancy of the builder had come out, in contrast with the solemn grandeur of his plan. And so it was within doors: portraits, and landscapes, and battle scenes, and hunting-groups, by the hundred, covered every yard of wall; and every available corner held a statue; but there was scarcely a masterpiece among them. There were a few good enamels, and many specimens of rare old china; these, for the most part, were to be found in apartments, where the vulgar public could

never hope to penetrate. There were priceless treasures, too, in the wire-guarded book shelves of the vast library; but the wandering bibliophile was fain to take these on trust; for a maddening glimpse through the crimson curtains of the doorway, was all that the implacable cicerone would allow. The furniture, except in one or two of the state-rooms, was entirely modern.

On the whole, most visitors, after making the grand tour of the mansion, issued into the air, with the weary satisfaction of men who have accomplished a long set task; mingled with a vague, guilty craving for instant bodily refreshment, in the shape of ardent drink. Whoso has plodded through the palace of Versailles, will, I think, appreciate and excuse such a frailty.

But the gardens were simply superb, and fully deserved their fame; not more on account of their extent and varied character, than for the extraordinary care with which they were tended—care, which had, evidently, not been intermitted for generations. Every foot of all those square miles of turf, was trim and smooth-shaven as a bowling-

green, even in obscure nooks and corners, where no foot of sojourner or stranger was ever likely to wander.

Leaning over the broad marble balustrade of the terrace overlooking the Italian garden—you began to realise more fully than you yet had done, that this was the dwelling-place of a family that, for centuries, could have known no ruinous reverse, but must ever have been waxing in prosperity, if not in honour.

This was absolutely true of the Charterises of Charteris Royal. No change or violence of political winds had been able to wreck, or seriously damage, the stout and stately argosy freighted with their fortunes: it weathered the two fiercest tempests that have laid England desolate, without starting a plank, or parting a rope-strand.

In the War of the Roses, the family espoused the winning side; and reaped therefrom no small advantage. The head of the house was playing at soldiers in his nursery, when the cannon were roaring on Marston Moor: his mother and guar-

dian—cousin of the MacCallum More, and wily as she was proud—(her hard handsome face fronts you as you enter the north gallery) contrived to temporize, without absolutely truckling to the Protector, or betraying her loyalty ; so that when the king came to his own again, she and her young son were able to ruffle it as bravely as the best, with consciences as clear as their rent roll.

Since then, one Charteris after another, in direct unbroken lineage, had succeeded to that goodly heritage ; and each had added to it, acre by acre, whenever a fair chance presented itself. They were a sober, God-fearing race ; just and charitable in the main ; coveting no man's goods, and never meddling oppressively with their neighbour's land-mark ; but the absorbent process—if slow—was not less sure : there were curiously few small holdings, within miles round Charteris Royal.

The head of the family usually sate in Parliament, as knight of his shire ; placing his pocket-borough at the disposal of the Chief—for the time

being—of the old-fashioned Whig party. The cadets went forth into the different professions—the army or navy, for choice—and served their country decently in their own honest hum-drum fashion. No Charteris ever sate in the Cabinet, or on the Law Bench : only one was thrust upwards by the force of interest, till he dozed among the bishops : the chronicle of English worthies—in art, or arms, or song—almost absolutely ignore the name. But, if they achieved no notable renown, they seldom fell into any grave disgrace or disaster. The black sheep, that occasionally varied the cleanly monotony of the fruitful fold, were so few and far between, that it was easy to slur over their names ; such gradually sunk below the surface of the general respectability ; and their place knew them no more.

In their vices, the Charterises never forgot the old monastic maxim—

Si non castè, cautè tamen ;

and even in their follies, they were methodical. For example, Squire Christopher, in whose time

the present huge mansion arose, almost as it now stands, was afflicted from his youth upwards with a building-mania ; but he restrained himself, till he had wedded a very wealthy wife ; and then indulged his tastes at the expense of the unsettled portion of her fortune, without loading his patrimony with a single mortgage.

Most of the family peculiarities above alluded to, were reproduced in the present representative of the name. John Aylmer Charteris was by no means a popular character. People called him proud, pompous, overbearing, stiff-necked, and a dozen hard names beside. He was simply a cautious, cold-blooded man ; incapable of acting on impulse ; singularly undemonstrative, even when most strongly moved ; quite alive to the advantages of his position, but still more keenly alive to its duties ; these he tried honestly to fulfil, without fear or favour ; dealing, intentionally, no harder measure to others than he would have dealt to himself. If he was proud, he was proud of his station only. The veriest cynic alive could hold his own personal merits of no less account,

than did John Charteris. He was just as plain and unpretending in every one of his tastes, as in his outward appearance and attire. But, by a simple train of exhaustive reasoning, he had come to consider his own domain as the very centre-point of the universe. He argued thus—“ The first country of the world is England; the first county in England is Chalkshire; and the first property in Chalkshire is Charteris Royal.”

Of this important trust he held himself to be practically only the steward, as his ancestors had been; and, whenever he stood stiffly on his dignity, he believed himself to be only discharging one of the duties of that state of life, to which it had pleased Providence to call him.

Though half the match-makers in England were hard upon his track, John Charteris never seriously thought of marriage till he was long past thirty; when his father's death put him in possession of the family honours. As soon as the days of mourning were expired, he betook himself to a certain cousin—a discreet and hon-

ourable matron, well versed in matters matrimonial—and bade her provide him with a suitable wife; by which he meant to imply, a maiden of blameless repute and ancient lineage; such an one as would be likely to beautify the head of his table, and bear an heir to Charteris Royal.

The good dame had only her kinsman's interest at heart; so it is hard to say why her choice fell upon that special

Penniless lass wi' a long pedigree :

for, there, certainly ended the parallel between the selected bride, and the decent, sponsible damsel, whom the Laird of Cockpen went forth to woo.

Marion Delancy was the fourth child, and eldest daughter, of a disreputable Irish baron; whose ambition it seemed to be, to illustrate in his own person the wild traditions of two generations back, when the 'strong blood' of the Tribes found vent, in setting God and man at defiance. He gave his children food, and rai-

ment, and shelter—such as his roving life would furnish ; but his notions of paternal obligations ended here ; for their training, mental and moral, he had neither heed nor care.

Marion grew up amongst her brethren, with no more educational advantages than fell to their share ; these were about as great, as would be bestowed on the lads in any well-regulated training-stable. She must have passed into womanhood, a helpless hoyden, had it not been for an aunt who took her in charge when she was fifteen, partly compassionating her forlorn condition ; partly anticipating possible profit to herself from the beauty, which, even then, promised wonders. But it was too late, to give the girl anything beyond a few superficial accomplishments ; just enough to give her a fair start in the social race, and to enable her to hold her own in *banale* conversation. Luckily, Marion had a keen natural wit ; and tact enough to stop when she was getting beyond her depth, before she began to flounder ungracefully : if she did make a mistake, her pleasant voice and enticing eyes often made her audience

laugh with, instead of at, the blunderer. Be this as it might—her *début* was an unquestionable success; the Wild Irish Girl did not take the town more completely by storm. People were good-natured enough to identify her rather with her chaperone,—a dame of unimpeached reputation, though a veteran schemer—than with her scape-grace sire; and doors, as a rule jealously guarded, opened wide to welcome her beauty. Rare beauty it assuredly was, though of a peculiar type.

Had this tale been written five years ago, one would have apologised for painting one's heroine *rousse*; in these days of Rachael-esque be-devilments, such excuse would certainly be wasted.

Whilst we are on the subject, let me confess that, only with an effort, do I refrain from uplifting my testimony against this last vagary of our womanhood. I will simply remark—not intending an unsavoury parallel, but rather interjecting a pious *Absit omen*—that the epoch, when the auri-comal mania most notoriously prevailed, was

in the days, when a certain Messalina led the fashions in Imperial Rome ;

Nigrum flavo crinem abscondente galero.

And those ingenious white-washers, who have made a martyr of Catiline, and a philanthropist of Robespierre, have not yet seen fit to set up that august lady, as an example for our wives and sisters to follow.

So—without more preamble—let us avow, that no flattery could have called the gorgeous masses of hair, that seemed too weighty a load for the small head and slender neck, chestnut, or auburn, or golden, or—anything but a rich, unmitigated red. Yet, even in those days, no one thought of instancing this, as a defect in her beauty. It rather seemed to soften the outline of features, that might otherwise have been too severe in their Grecian purity. There was a want of shade, certainly, in the faint pencillings of the brows ; but *en revanche*, the lashes were dark and heavy, matching well with melting eyes of the deep Irish grey.

Marion Charteris was now in her twenty-sixth year; so far, rather slight than grandly developed in figure; yet she carried off an unusually lofty stature right royally. She had certainly fulfilled the chief condition that, as was aforesaid, her husband had in view, when—by deputy—he first sought her hand. She had borne him a sturdy heir, and a second son besides; as though to guard against contingent failure of issue. She presided at his great ceremonious feasts; looking like a masterpiece of Tintoretto in the gorgeous apparel that she loved to wear—and with reason; for even her enemies allowed, that Mrs. Charteris could stand a combination of colour, that, on other women, would have appeared tawdry and vulgar, if it had not made their beauty seem pale and wan.

Nevertheless, there were many who—not being over captious or censorious as a rule—scrupled not to affirm, that Lady Syndale had committed the prime error of her match-making career, in electing this brilliant dame to rule over her cousin's household.

Marion was inexcusably rash and reckless, at times—to say the least of it; so much so, indeed, that her partisans were wont to make this a great point in her favour; arguing, with some show of plausibility, that anyone who could afford thus absolutely to dispense with outward forms of precaution, must have very little wrong intention to conceal. She flirted, quite as outrageously and openly, as her sworn friend and ally, Laura Brancepeth. But there was this difference between them. The last-named coquette was much more indiscriminate in her sport; and would count half-a-dozen ‘cripples’ around her in the course of an evening’s flight-shooting, without one clean-killed bird; whereas Marion rather resembled Cooper’s veteran hunter, who, when he wanted a mallard, slew it, stone-dead, with a single bullet from Killdeer.

With all her imprudence, the mistress of Charteris Royal was no remiss or uncourteous *châtelaine*. She had plenty of tact, as has been said above, when she chose to use it; and knew better than to neglect—much less discomfit—any

one of her husband's friends ; indeed, sometimes, she seemed more solicitous about their comforts and amusements than about those of her own intimates, who were almost all of the fast set *par excellence*. Perhaps, she thought these last were fully capable of taking care of themselves.

All this while John Charteris plodded on the decent tenour of his way ; caring not a whit for any of these things. His wife's appearance would have done credit to an establishment, even more magnificent than his own ; he never expressed a decided wish, that she did not carry out readily and promptly ; he always found her perfectly good-tempered, and sufficiently interested in his favourite plans to be able to sympathize on their success, or miscarriage ; and she was ever specially attentive to such guests as he himself delighted to honour. Recognising all this—not without sober self-congratulation—John Charteris expected nothing more.

During the brief wooing which was transacted mainly by proxy, he had not thought it necessary to simulate devotion to his *fiancée* ; nor,

since their marriage had he ever paid her more attention than courtesy and kindness demanded. But—had he loved her as his own soul—he could not have trusted her more implicitly. In spite of all the perils, that were sure to beset the path of a beautiful, heedless woman, ever ‘too much alone’—perils that a more obtuse man could hardly have ignored—there never had crossed his mind the glimmer of a suspicion, that Marion could possibly go astray. It is true that the world had never accused her of anything more than folly, and perhaps heartlessness; but—had evil reports been rife, and John Charteris been compelled to interfere—he would have done so, only to save the family credit and dignity from vulgar aspersion.

As things stood, he would far sooner have thought of begrudging his wife her amusements, than of stinting his son in his play-hours.

On that same child, be it observed, John Charteris had bestowed all the natural affection, that it was given to his cold stolid nature to feel. People said that, had the heir been suddenly

removed, his brother would soon have been set up on the same pedestal in the father's heart; but this was the merest matter of speculation.

Now, you know enough of the mansion and its inmates, before you follow yon gay gallant under the ponderous portal-arch of Charteris Royal.

CHAPTER IX.

CHAMP CLOS.

THERE was only a small party in the house just then ; and all the men folk, with one exception, were out cover-shooting. John Charteris had business at home that morning, and had no intention of joining the others till after luncheon. Like almost all intensely respectable men, gifted with good digestion and not given to field sports, he much affected a heavy mid-day meal.

It seemed to Flemyng, that the other's greeting was unusually cold and constrained. This may not have been all fancy ; though in the vanity of his egotism he set it down to the wrong cause. Without being specially hard or uncharitable, Charteris was utterly incapable of sympathising with ill success. He had a vague idea that no man, unendowed with a liberal inde-

pendence, had a right to shirk the work appointed for him, or to fall ignominiously short of his set purpose. And Vincent Flemyngh's attainment of high university honours had been, for a year or more, considered throughout the country-side as a foregone conclusion. It was rather a relief to both parties, when the luncheon gong cut short cold condolences and formal inquiries ; and John Charteris, with evident alacrity, led the way to the scene of action.

There, at least, the visitor had no reason to be dissatisfied with the warmth of his welcome. Had the fair *châtelaine* been aware of her husband's shortcomings in this respect, she could scarcely have made more charming amends.

Marion had never set her foot on Irish ground since early childhood ; but—besides the eyes above alluded to, and a delicious suspicion of a brogue—a certain impulsiveness of manner would have told you, at once, on which side of St. George's Channel she was born. People, paying the merest visit of ceremony, went away with the comfortable conviction, that Mrs. Char-

teris had taken a fancy to them at first sight; and many were afterwards oppressed with unmerited self-reproach, on finding that the acquaintance, so auspiciously commenced, never progressed another step towards real intimacy. If she comported herself thus with comparative strangers, you may guess how she would welcome a special favourite.

Nevertheless, during luncheon the discourse was confined to trivial generalities. Flemyng's recent disaster was utterly ignored; and Marion's eloquent eyes, for a while, were discreetly dumb. Before the meal was fairly over, the host went his own way—with slight and cold farewells, it must be owned; and Vincent was left, once more, to feminine consolation.

The reception-rooms at Charteris Royal were arranged, thus. From the main corridor opened state-saloons, unequal in size; beyond which state-guests were not expected to penetrate. From the smaller of these presence-chambers (if you were of the inner circle) you passed into the Green Drawing-room — a pleasant apartment

enough, not too large for comfort. Some good cabinet pictures lined the tinted walls; and many small tables of marqueterie, buhl, and mosaic, were loaded with precious nick-nacks, from all climes and countries.

Beyond this again, lay the real Gynæceum—the boudoir of the beautiful *châtelaine*; wherein, if scandal was to be trusted, she sat and wove nets to catch men's souls.

Save to a very few of either sex, it was, in truth, a sealed chamber. Many curious glances had been levelled at those mysterious portals, as they opened to give admittance or egress to one of the elect; but the keenest eye had never caught more than a rapid glance of pale blue damask, and gleams of silver; for, within the door swept down a curtain of dark velvet, thick and ponderous as the *contre-vent* of a continental cathedral; impervious alike to sight and sound.

The small party at Charteris Royal, just then, was made up, almost entirely, of Marion's own friends. Every one knows the freemasonry that exists in such a set; it is not without its social

advantages: if staid busy-bodies would imitate the tact and good nature, with which the *lionnes* refrain from troubling themselves about their neighbours' concerns (so long as purposes clash not), it would save the world much disquietude, and yet not involve any connivance at crime. On the present occasion, when the *coterie* assembled in the Green Drawing-room forbore, either by word or gesture, to testify surprise or intelligence at the vanishment of two out of the midst of them, they did not consider themselves accomplices in anything, beyond a very venial flirtation. But our modern court dames are far better trained than their ancestresses of Lady Heron's time; I believe they would assist at even a royal 'scuffle,'—were such a thing possible in this our day—without once being tempted to laugh, or glance aside.

The famous boudoir was an irregularly-shaped hexagon, with divers nooks and recesses; of these, the one furthest from the entrance was nearly filled up by a deep broad couch, strewn with many cushions, and a very low, luxurious arm-

chair. Somehow—at the first glance it struck you, that the last-named piece of furniture was, as it were, part and parcel of the other; just as the little fald-stool outside, is inseparable from a confessional.

The sternest Puritan must needs have owned the seductive influences of the place; even had he resisted the temptation to wax amative, or at the least, confidential. A warm, languid fragrance, in the coldest season, stole in from the winter-garden without; the murmur of an unseen fountain was just audible enough, to save dead silence, if converse should halt; the sun himself could only peep in, modestly and discreetly, through a screen of giant ferns.

Mrs. Charteris subsided, quite naturally, into her favourite corner among the cushions; while her companion occupied the above-mentioned *causeuse*, with the air of one resuming a familiar seat; and her eyes said,—“*Tirez le premier.*”

Now Vincent Flemyng’s meditations, during his long lonely ride, had been the reverse of saint-like. Other devils besides Belial had been

whispering in his ear; and he was just in the mood to hearken readily.

Ever since his discomfiture he had been in a restless, spiteful frame of mind, wanting—as the populace would phrase it—‘to take it out of *some one*.’ Like many men of his weak moral stamp, he was strangely tenacious in his resentments; he knew, well enough, that his proceedings at Charteris Royal had already made Seyton uneasy, and were likely—if persevered in—to vex him yet more. Vincent had always been vaguely jealous of his brother-in-law, though he affected pity for his good-natured rusticity: he had begun to hate him, within the last twenty-four hours. Of course, this was not the chief excitement; indeed, Flemyng was, probably, not conscious of it; yet, like an extra draught of strong liquor, it was enough to make him more vicious and determined. Had it been otherwise—had he owned the motive to himself—it would not have been the first time that malice has given a spur to lagging love.

Unhappily, no such stimulus was needed here.

Vincent had been much more serious in his 'foolery,' than Tom Seyton suspected, or than Mrs. Charteris—to do her justice—had any idea of. He aspired to more solid food than the light and illusory cates—sugared and perfumed though they were—with which, alone, the trained coquette seemed disposed to feed his devotion; and fully intended, at the earliest opportunity, to wring from her a direct avowal, or to compromise her in her own esteem.

Taking all things into consideration, you will see that Vincent Flemyngh meant mischief that day. He had scant time before him, too; and more than once, as he rode along, had flashed across him the terrible text—spoken on the verge of the Unpardonable Sin, and quoted by Sathanas since, perhaps oftener than any other morsel of misused Scripture—“What thou doest, do quickly.”

Before he reached Charteris Royal he had arranged in his mind a very promising programme; but, like many others that look pretty on paper, it did not seem so feasible when the critical moment came.

“An ounce of practice is worth a ton of theory,”—said some practical philosopher of old time.

His words were true, if trite. We are apt to forget, in these erudite days, that all the science under the sun will not, under certain circumstances, compensate for the lack of promptitude, or daring, or coolness. If mimic war became a stern reality, I can fancy a certain famous and irascible commander wishing, regretfully, that he had once more at his elbow the simple straight-going galloper, at whose head he has so often levelled volleys of strong language; and some of the competitive cracks might show to disadvantage, by the side of that gay and debonair *aide*, who, when a Russian round-shot rolled his horse over under him, arose with slow deliberation—standing still, under a *feu d'enfer*, till he had brushed off every particle of dust from his sleeve—and then returned to the shelter of the trenches, with the same measured, graceful gait, that has borne him through many a morning lounge by the Rails.

Surely, the apophthegm applies, *Tam Veneri quam Marti.*

It has been stated once before that cynicism was a favourite tenet of the Quietist set. Lauzun or Casanova could scarcely have discoursed more learnedly on certain subjects, than did some of these callow libertines, whose experiments, hitherto, had been made only *in corpore servili*. If you hearkened to them, they would have you believe, that the siege of any virtue whatsoever, was the merest question of time and opportunity. In this discourse, Vincent Flemyng had ever been as forward as his fellows. But, since he began to bask in Marion Charteris' smiles, his tone had sensibly altered ; though he had the grace to refrain from any pointed or personal allusions, he spoke with the *aplomb* and authority, of a passed *bachelier ès amours*.

It was provoking enough, when the moment of action came, to find his theories fail him, as better ones have failed better men ; but the truth must be told. Vincent Flemyng remained silent till, for very shame, he could no longer underlie

the challenge of the dark grey eyes. Then he spoke—not very much to the purpose, after all.

“ You have not pitied me, yet.”

Now, in that opening, there was worse than a blunder of inexperience. The veriest novice—not an egotist into the bargain—would have known better than to make his first words of confidence, after long absence, turn on his own good or evil fortunes. Thinking over these things later, Marion Charteris appreciated the *gaucherie* as it deserved; though, for the moment, it passed unnoticed.

“ I’ve done nothing else, since the bad news came,” she said, softly. “ But pity bores some people so, that I didn’t like to speak of it first. Tell me how it happened.”

And he did tell her; glozing over his own deficiencies, and laying hard blame on others; as he well knew how to do. But, here again, he won implicit credit and boundless sympathy.

“ I never heard such an atrocious shame,” Mrs. Charteris said; “ I’ve no patience with those

prim prejudiced Dons; and they are not a bit better than the rest of us, after all. I've never believed in them, since we passed through Oxford, soon after we were married, and John took me to see his college; and the Master wanted to make love to me, while he was showing me founders, and martyrs, and all that kind of people. I shall never forget his long-winded compliments; nor the way he kept looking sideways out of his wicked old eyes. I'm very glad you've done with them all. But—poor Kate!—what a disappointment it has been to her! I'm almost as sorry for her as for you. And Mr. Seyton must have been bitterly vexed, too. It was only last week we were talking about it."

Flemyng's face lowered sullenly. He was selfish enough to wish to monopolise *all* the sympathy, and to grudge the tiniest share of it to the sister who loved him so dearly; but the mention of his brother-in-law's name—just then, and from those lips—chafed him sorely.

"Kate bears it well enough," he answered, rather coldly and carelessly. "As for Seyton

—I can't conceive what possible interest my affairs can have for him. I wish he would not be so fond of meddling with them. *Parlons d'autre chose.* I've something more serious to say to you to-day."

Marion's handsome eyes opened, rather widely, at Flemyng's first words, for their bitterness fairly puzzled her; but, as he spoke the last, they settled into a look of demure expectation, beneath which sparkled a gleam of covert amusement. In very truth, what had she to fear—with her five years in hand, and the experience of a score such 'passages' to aid her?

Vincent paused awhile, as if to give fuller effect to his communication. Then he said, with some solemnity—

"I start for Rome next week; it is uncertain when I may return."

Now, at this point in his programme, Marion was supposed to start, or change colour visibly—if she repressed a faint cry. Unluckily, nothing of the sort took place.

When the Earl of Salisbury, with infinite toil

and difficulty, brought his battering engines to bear upon the battlements of Dunbar, and discharged them with great pomp of preparation, it must have been a severe trial even of that good-natured noble's temper, when he saw no more damage done than the raising of dust, that the Amazon's kerchief could sweep away. Alas, my brethren ! Many dames and damsels, since Black Agnes's day—not of the haughty Douglas blood—have been found, saucy enough to set at nought the heaviest of man's artillery.

It is no wonder Flemyng felt intensely discomfited, when, looking earnestly on his companion, he met—not the expected signs of trepidation—but a light, mocking smile.

“ And is that all, *beau sire* ? ” she said. “ Do you know, that you almost frightened me with your solemn preamble ? You could not look more dolorous, if you were going to be transported, instead of starting on an ‘ outing ’ for your own good pleasure. I should rather envy you, if—— ”

Vincent broke in here : he was so very angry,

that he could hardly keep within the bounds of courtesy.

“I do envy *you*—your faculty of being amused. When I like people, I hate to leave them for long; and I don’t see anything very exhilarating, in indefinite absence.”

Mrs. Charteris saw that her gay humour had carried her somewhat too far; she was not tired of her pretty plaything yet; and was, besides, really too good-natured to hurt anyone’s feelings wittingly. Her face softened on the instant; and the smile faded from her lip, though it lingered in her eyes.

“Indeed, I did not mean to be unkind. I had not an idea of indefinite absence. Why cannot you come back when you please? Vincent, surely you have not got into any scrape—already?”

In the midst of the lavish wealth and luxury of her present existence, some of her childish memories haunted Marion still. She could not forget, how often her old Turkoman of a father, would pluck up his tent-pole at the shortest

notice, and depart for fresh pastures, having exhausted all the forage around him. Even now, her only idea of a grave embarrassment was, one of the exchequer.

Flemyng answered, less impatiently than before, but still with a marked discontent, and some slight hesitation to boot; for his financial conscience smote him, just then, as it had done the night before.

“No,—that is not the reason; at least, not the main one. But I think of going in for painting, as a profession. They tell me I might succeed—anyhow, it’s worth trying. I’m sick of book-work. Besides, what should keep me here, or make me hurry back? No one will miss me, except my mother, and Kate—if Seyton will let her. Some will be glad enough, when I’m gone. I think, your husband will be one of these. His manner to-day was hardly to be mistaken.”

If Marion had shown fear or shrinking, or even dislike, at the mention of that last name—the name that she was bound to honour above all—it would have been better, than the careless con-

tempt that she took no pains to conceal. Yet, it may be, that some of the scorn that lightened over her face may have been roused, unconsciously to herself, by the childish fretfulness of that last reply.

“What an ingenious self-tormenter it is,” she said. “I wonder if anyone ever took the trouble before to decipher Mr. Charteris’ looks and manners, so carefully? *I* never did, I’m ashamed to say. I am sure you are wrong—not that it would matter much, if you were right. I believe he rather likes you than otherwise; but he would no more think of showing disapproval of *my* friends, than I should of betraying that I was bored by his. I fancy the painting scheme, very much; it would be so nice to sit to you, when you were famous: and you will be that, I know—if you’ll only try. But you can work just as well here, after one season in Rome. Now—listen, Signor d’Urbino; you don’t deserve any favour, for the ingratitude of certain words in that cross speech of yours; but I’ll be magnanimous, and put you in good humour again, without more teasing.

Do you know, that, when I was amused just now, it was more at the coincidence than anything else ? It *was* a coincidence: for you could only have guessed by a miracle that we think of spending next Easter in Rome."

Vincent Flemyngh must have been made of stuff marvellously stiff and stern, if he had not been instantly cured of his evil temper; though perchance he ran the more risk of succumbing to another malady; for those last seemingly simple words were barbed by a glance of perilous meaning. He was not often wont to show surprise and pleasure, so openly and naturally as he did now; indeed, he answered, with an audible catching of the breath.

"Is it possible? It would be too cruel, to mock me with false hopes?"

With the tiny broidered glove that she held in her bare right hand, she smote him lightly on the cheek.

"Ah, slow of belief! It would serve you right if I told you that it was only an idea, not an arranged plan. But I'm not in a cruel mood to-

day ; besides, you've had enough to worry you lately, poor thing ! It is quite settled that we are to be in Rome early in March, to stay—that is, I shall—till the middle of May. John will only convoy me there and back, I suppose : he would pine to death if he were two whole months away from Charteris Royal. Don't you wonder how it was first thought of ? It's simple enough. His only sister will never leave Italy while she lives, and her health is very uncertain now. And Aunt Minna, who was more than a mother to me, seems a fixture there, too. So we are going to pay our respects to our respective relatives ; a sort of pilgrimage, you know. Isn't it touching ? And I shall be able to superintend your studies, and criticise your models, and get you to lionize me over the palaces in your play-hours. *Enfant, es-tu content à la fin ?*"

Though her tone was bantering still, and bespoke the easy security of woman dealing with boyhood, Vincent Flemyng was rather more than content, and he told Marion so—this time without hesitating.

It is not necessary to chronicle their converse further ; those brief, broken sentences—more subdued than the tinkle of the distant fountain—could be edifying to no readers of mine : to some, possibly, they would not even be new, or instructive. Yet every one might have been uttered aloud, and overheard by any but ill-natured ears, without involving either of the speakers in a suspicion of intended guilt. They were simply the common-places that might pass between very old friends, who were about to be separated for a while ; flavoured perhaps with a slight spice of coquetry on the one side, and sentimental folly on the other. No very pungent seasonings, one would say. As the North-country sage remarks,—"That's as thereafter may be."

It is true, that Marion had called Vincent Flemyng from childhood by his Christian name, and looked down upon his recent manhood from the height of five-and-twenty summers ; it is certain that she had now no other intention than that of prosecuting—at his expense—fresh studies in her favourite science ; if any shadowy compunc-

tion crossed her mind, that some harm or sorrow might possibly come to the subject of her experiments, she stifled it by thinking of the charming wife that she would search out and provide for him some day; for of jealousy—present or prospective—she felt not a whit.

But—it was, perhaps, just retribution—she had mistaken the character with which she had to deal.

Vincent Flemyngh's infirmity of purpose and lack of nerve prevented his being really dangerous as yet; he had also some few very faint scruples still to cast behind him; but there was a black drop in his blood, that with time, practice, and opportunity, was soon to tinge his whole nature. No generous impulses or high aspirations had ever taken root in his shallow, arid heart: yet the ground did not long lie fallow before the evil sower was busy. Truly, the tares grew rank and rife there already; though the season of ripening and reaping was not yet.

Speaking as an individual, and an outsider,—I decline to trust, in any shape whatsoever, either

love or friendship Platonical. In all ages, it seems to have been little better than a delusion and a snare.

Did the devotion which began *en tout bien, et tout honneur*, always hold pure to the end, when, in the soft *langue d'Oc*, the troubadour chanted, to ears willing and unwilling, the praises of his sovereign lady? Scarcely so: or we should never have heard of such stories as that one, which might stand side by side with the Thyestean horror. I doubt if the fashion answered, under the starched *régime* of the Virgin Queen, when the courtly Audacity wooed his fair Discretion in the long-winded conceits of Euphues; or, later, when Chloris, in rouge, powder, and patches, blushed over the mawkish pastorals of a periwigged Amyntas. I doubt yet more, if it can answer in these days of 'innocent fastnesses,' when our children cut their wisdom teeth so exceedingly early; when Prudery on her promotion disdains not the decorative devices of Anonyma; and when Herè is prone to distrust her own fascinations, unaided by the sisterly Cestus.

I am far from insinuating that modern Platonics must necessarily, or even probably, come to grief. I simply suggest, that the principle is more treacherous than that of open and avowed flirtation, shielded by no specious pretext of ancient friendship, occult sympathies, or difference of age.

From all this it may be inferred that, if a majority of the matrons named in this tale, should comport themselves after a fashion unbecoming the sedate dignity of their order, it does not follow that their chronicler should endorse such proceedings, or hold them up as models for imitation. On the other hand, I will not in anywise admit, that the state of things here depicted is either imaginary, or grossly overdrawn: the colouring may be coarsely or clumsily laid on, if you will: I deny that it is exaggerated.

Did not that illustrious philosopher—who, from the height of his æsthetic *cathedra*, is good enough, week by week, to dictate to us what, morally speaking, we ought to eat, drink, and avoid—indite, only last season, one of his most

authoritative essays on “Wives and their Followers?” Remembering how, when the said edict was issued, it only provoked a twitter of irreverent mirth amongst the ‘light-minded birds’ that it was meant to warn—I expect that this meek protest of mine will meet with no better fate.

In the present case, Mrs. Charteris committed herself to no direct avowal; her companion ventured on no rasher familiarity than that of laying his lips lightly on her hand at parting; but she promised correspondence, and made several other small concessions, chiefly prospective, which it is needless to particularise. With all the advantage of superior age and experience, she achieved but a very Pyrrhic victory after all.

It was no great wonder if Vincent Flemyng issued from the *tête-à-tête* with a flushed cheek and sparkling eyes—contented and hopeful, if not wildly triumphant. He had gained a short step or two on that evil road, where the last strides are so fearfully long and rapid; novice as he was, he knew that right well. So, when they rejoined the party in the Green Drawing-room, he took

part in the somewhat lively word-play, with a confidence and success which rather surprised even his patroness herself; and caused Lady Greystoke—one of the best judges of ‘colts’ in all England—thus to deliver herself to Marion soon after he departed:—

“ You’ve always shown good taste in choosing your *cavalieri*, dear; I must say that. I think your page promises very fairly. He’s dreadfully conceited, of course; but I think conceit suits that style of face. He wants repose; and you must teach him not to look round, after each of his sharp or pretty speeches, to see if the hit is palpable or not. But all these things are a mere question of education: don’t you agree with me?”

And Marion answered not in words; but smiled a little demure smile, in which there was satisfaction, but scant personal interest—very much as if her pet performing bullfinch had been highly praised.

On the whole, as the Kitten bore Flemyngh rapidly and safely homewards, he was warmed

with a comfortable inward conviction, of having achieved a decided social success, and of having, perchance, left a little crop of regrets behind him. Indeed, during all the remainder of the evening he bore himself with a complacent—not to say conquering—air, which chafed Tom Seyton sorely, and puzzled his devoted womankind.

Vincent's brief stay at Warleigh passed off without any further 'breezes;' but Mrs. Flemyngh was the only one who felt, or testified, desolation at his departure. Even unsuspecting Kate confessed to herself, that a sojourn in foreign parts might be beneficial to her brother, if not to his worldly prospects.

So Flemyngh, after settling some necessary Oxford claims, and making brief preparations in town, started, with two travelling companions, on one of the myriad roads that, as the proverb tells us, lead to the site of the Golden Column.

CHAPTER X.

FELO DE SE.

You may remember that Tom Seyton, in his first perplexity after witnessing a certain interview on his road home from Torrcaster, resolved within himself that he ‘would talk to Kate about it.’ This he carried out on the morrow of the day, the events of which have been told in the last chapter.

Mrs. Seyton was quite superb in her indignation. Being a very woman, of course the vials of her wrath were poured out on the feminine culprit; and—also, of course—at the end of her tirade, she professed herself “unable to guess, what attraction Brian could find, in that audacious vulgar style of beauty.” Suddenly she broke off with a comic horror; seeing, or thinking she saw, signs of dissent in her husband’s face!

“Oh, Tom, I do believe you admire her. Don’t confess it, if you do: I couldn’t stand *that*.”

Seyton’s hearty, jovial laugh rang out, unrestrained.

“I won’t be intimidated,” he said. “I do admire her, in a certain way; not exactly as a woman, but as a very magnificent animal. And I don’t quite see the vulgarity you talk of; at least, not on the surface: there’s enough and to spare below, I daresay. But as to the audacity—I go with you thoroughly, my Kate. I’d shut Brian up in a mad-house, if I had my way, sooner than see him make that girl mistress of Mote. Even if she were perfection, her connections are simply infamous. There are all sorts of shady reports about the father, though I’ve never taken the trouble to listen to them; and there’s a cousin always hanging about the house, than whom there’s not a cleverer scoundrel unhung; that I happen to know. What’s to be done? I suppose I ought not to keep Brian’s secret, if he has one; and yet, of all things in this world, I

hate meddling with other people's affairs. Perhaps there's nothing more than folly in it, after all."

"There can't be a doubt about it," Kate said, decisively; "I'm sure, poor Mr. Maskelyne always expected you to look after Brian. Besides, you would really be his guardian if anything happened to his mother; and something would happen, if that boy were to commit himself irretrievably. It would kill her; I'm certain of it."

"You're more than half right," Seyton answered, "but one's duty needs to be made very plain, before one can swallow the 'tale-bearing' pill; especially when it's tale-bearing of women, to women. I'll tell you what I'll do: I'll sound Brian himself first. He's sure to be at Claxton Wood on Monday, and it will be easy to find an opportunity. He's a good lad enough at bottom; and he really likes me, I do believe; he'll tell no lies, if he don't own all the truth. I shouldn't be much afraid for him, if this particular folly was not in his blood."

With this Kate was fain to be content; indeed,

she herself thought it about the best plan ; for she liked the tale-bearing part of the business not a whit better than Tom did ; and would have infinitely preferred, that things should be set right, without troubling Mrs. Maskelyne.

Claxton Wood held a fox, as usual, but not one of the right sort : the varlet kept dodging round the edge of the brakes, till half the horses out were fretted into foam with perpetual false starts ; and then died ingloriously, after a brief, sulky ring through a few deep inclosures.

It was a long distance to the next likely draw ; for even the hounds never dreamt of finding in the copses and belts that they bustled through, as a matter of form, on their way. Seyton soon found himself alongside of Brian Maskelyne, to the rearward of the long cavalcade, that jogged on by two's and three's, along the narrow lanes and field-roads. Few words—and these of no significance—had passed between them, besides the wonted morning greeting ; but Brian knew perfectly well what Seyton wanted, when the latter's whip-handle touched him lightly on the shoulder.

He reined back till they rode alone together, and waited quietly for the other to begin.

Tom Seyton, being absolutely incapable of a long oration, was apt to come to the point with scanty form of words. He did so now, though he spoke with all gentleness and consideration ; claiming no shadow of authority or title to interfere, beyond that of hereditary friendship.

“I was only a boy when you were christened,” he said, “but I remember your father’s proud, happy face, as well as if it were yesterday. I remember that same face, the day before he died —how pale, and haggard, and eager it looked, as he held my hand, and whispered : ‘You’ll help Brian, if ever you can ?’ I promised him I would ; though I wondered why he had not put confidence in some one older than I was, and wiser and cleverer than I ever shall be. And, by God’s help, so I will, so long as we both shall live. Brian, that is what makes me say to you, to-day, that I would rather—a hundred times—see you lying by George Maskelyne’s side, than sitting by Bessie Standen’s, and calling her wife.”

Voice and lip shook a little as he ended, and the bluff honest face was strangely troubled; nor had Brian's been quite free from emotion throughout; especially since the mention of his dead father's name.

There was nothing in him of Vincent Flemyng's fretful perverse conceit; nor had one word of the warning chafed him. Having loved and honoured his counsellor for many a year, he did not love or honour him a whit less, for having spoken out boldly, much that he knew himself to be true—whether he would heed it or no. In his great black eyes, as he answered, there rose once more that peculiar look—half earnest, half dreamy. Seyton, who had known his face from babyhood, was struck just then by its ominous, melancholy beauty, as though he saw it for the first time.

“Don't think me mad,” he said, “or too ungrateful, because I can't thank you properly; or answer you on the spot, exactly as you would wish. You are right in much that you say; wrong—where you don't know those you speak of. I will promise you, to think over every word

you have said : I can't promise more, just now. I don't ask you to keep my secret : but I do think your speaking to my mother would do more harm than good. I would tell her myself if there were anything to tell ; and so I will—always."

He held out his hand ; and the other pressed it heartily. Nevertheless, there was a steadfast calmness in Brian's tone and manner that Seyton liked ill ; it savoured too much of a set purpose, a pre-arranged plan of speaking. But he felt rather at a loss how to continue the conversation : it was not precisely a case for argument. Besides, that non-resisting reticence is so very difficult to grapple with. Perhaps it was a relief to both, when they were interrupted by one of those Marplots, who infest even our hunting-fields, ranging up alongside.

Who knows not that respectable, blundering creature, with the broad flat face, weak smiling lips, and vacant eyes ; who is perpetually breaking into confidential corners, not so much from curiosity, as from helpless awkwardness and lack of tact ; whose position in life, as the objectionable

Third, seems to be no less clearly defined, than that of the Fourteenth guest at Parisian dinner-tables?

It was one of these worthies who ranged up alongside of the pair; and prolonged his platitudes about sport and farming, till the first whimper of a hound in Denton Spiny drove out—from Tom Seyton's mind at least—all other anxieties, save and except that of getting, as quickly as possible, to the favourite corner, whence he generally secured a good start over about the stiffest bit of vale in Marlshire.

They had a very quick half-hour; then some steady hunting; then a short, sharp burst, and a kill. The young one, that Tom was schooling that day, came out brilliantly. Nevertheless, as he rode slowly homewards, his contentment was dashed by more than one misgiving of having bungled in his mission; and Kate, though she said it not—was rather of the same opinion, when she heard the little that her husband had to tell.

Had they known all the truth, both might have used the comfortable unguent, that has soothed

the souls of many abler negotiators,—the reflection that all the diplomacy on earth would, probably, not have arrested what was to be, or turned him aside from his appointed path who was bound to 'dree his weird.'

Maskelyne kept his word, when he was alone at night, in thinking over all the words that he had heard that day. He thought—till his face grew white and worn with the inward struggle; a sharper one, truly, than often is waged within so young a breast.

For most boys, tempted in like manner, seal their own ruin in a paroxysm of rash unreasoning passion. But Brian set his hand to the work deliberately; counting first the cost to its uttermost farthing. That he should make light of the peril of his worldly prospects, and the possible loss of his inheritance, was only natural. He was just at the age, when those who have only *heard* of such things as poverty and embarrassment, are loth to believe in the cruelty of Time: to these simple Erastians the Future promises all rewards, and no punishments. Besides this,

Brian knew that, at the worst, he could but be left entirely dependent on his mother ; and perhaps he knew, too, better than any one, how far he might rely on her weakness or leniency.

To do him simple justice—not thus appeared to him the pale, quiet shadow, that so often that night seemed to stand at his shoulder. There was no menace in the soft eyes, that seemed to look into his own with a sad appeal ; nor on the tender lips that never, since they first touched his cheek, could he remember set or stern. If Emily Maskelyne had exercised her authority austere—or even conscientiously, as many would think—her son would have emancipated himself far more easily : now — there was no yoke to break.

For a while, it seemed as if the gentle pleading would prevail. But, soon, by Brian's side stood another phantasm—scarcely shadowy in its brilliance of colouring, and clearness of outline ; with a smile on its scarlet lips, mocking, but tempting still ; and wealth of promises in the glorious blue eyes—the semblance of Bessie

Standen, as he saw her last; half withdrawn from his embrace, and murmuring low—"Just one—no more." As he mused, her warm fragrant breath seemed close to his cheek, and almost fanning his hair. Besides, his troth was already plighted.

Do you doubt, which of those two pleaders conquered at the last?

Brian Maskelyne felt a certain relief, when his mind was made up, and his course of action finally determined. He was not likely to change either now; for, in spite of a certain tenderness of nature, he had a strong taint of his 'dour' race — noted for their reckless obstinacy of resolve.

Within five minutes after the great question of his life was decided, he had fallen into the deep dreamless sleep that so often follows a bodily or mental conflict.

CHAPTER XI.

A LEAP IN THE DARK.

NEVER gardener watched the rarest tropical plant, more carefully than did Emily Maskelyne, her son. On this especial morning, there appeared some slight reason for anxiety. The dark circles round Brian's eyes made them look unnaturally bright and large ; and there was fever both in brow and hand. But he was tolerably well practised in parrying his mother's solicitudes ; and he soon managed to satisfy her, now.

Though there was something forced and nervous in his laugh and manner, the composure with which he bore himself was quite marvellous, considering the circumstances. Truly the patrician youth of Sparta or Rome—hardened by all the rough work of the gymnasium, and the sto-

cism of the Schools—compared to their modern anti-types, were the merest tyros in the Art of Taking Things Coolly.

Brian Maskelyne purposed that day to go forth from his home—not to return thither, unless bringing with him his bride. Several causes contributed to this seemingly insane precipitation; though none were sufficient to excuse it.

First, there was opportunity—chief, since the world began, of all, ‘irritaments of evil.’

The squadrons quartered in Towcester held high festival; embracing regimental races, private theatricals, and the inevitable ball: to this entertainment Brian was invited (he cultivated soldiers a good deal, and was down for the Household Cavalry); and he was to stay the week out, being put up in barracks. So he had no occasion to invent an excuse for absence; while he would have leisure enough, to concert a plan of proceeding with his betrothed.

Next, there was the natural impulse to carry out, as speedily as possible, the decision that had been long—if not long enough—in doubt;

suspense and uncertainty, that were as matters of course, twenty-four hours ago, seemed intolerable now.

It is the way with all conscripts, in every kind of warfare. They can never be kept steady in the trenches; though they will advance very readily to the storm. Surely, the most martial of all slogans, is—"Stand Fast, Craigellachy."

Furthermore, Brian had an exaggerated idea of Seyton's influence and power. Their conversation had left him utterly in the dark, as to how the latter would act; and he was possessed with a vague apprehension as to the consequences, if Tom were to combine with the Regent-Mother to thwart him. Besides all this, he had that morbid horror of a 'scene' which has made older and wiser men moral dastards; causing them to seek temporary safety in flight, though they left duty and humanity behind.

Can you understand, how Brian's conscience perforce held its peace, whilst he meditated nothing less than a black crime?

It seems to me that, among those which our laws punish heavily, there are many sins more venial, than some that mock at all human justice. Short and sharp shrift would old Draco have given to the reprobate, who should have lifted his hand against the mother that bore him ; but, even in that code, I presume no punishment was set down for the son that broke his mother's heart, by leaving her—perchance for ever and aye—withouit a word of warning or farewell.

Just such a wrong did Brian purpose now ; a wrong so bitter, that it might have cost a remorseful pang to Emily Maskelyne's worst enemy, if she had ever made such a one in her gentle life. Yet he was of a kindly, generous nature in the main ; one of the 'well-conditioned youths,' after poor Lord Carlisle's own heart.

If all the romantic nonsense, that ever has been written or spoken about Love, were true to the letter, there would still be excuse needed—and wanting—for the cruel exclusiveness of the passion: self-sacrificing with regard to one

being, and ruthless to all others—it sometimes contrives to ignore natural affections, not less easily, than the other parts of the Whole Duty of Man.

If pride and envy prompted the first murder, I believe that the old question—"Where is the woman?"—might have been asked, and answered, on the occasion of the first parricide.

So Brian Maskelyne—being such a one as I have tried to describe—on this occasion sate with his mother through breakfast (which he consumed with a very tolerable appetite); answered her questions; and listened to her plans for the future, without any outward sign of emotion. He scarcely shrank or shivered, when the poor lady bade him good-by; with some jesting cautions about "taking care of himself; and not getting into mischief in barracks, or at the ball." Yet, Emily Maskelyne did remember, in the desolate after-days, that her son's arm lingered longer round her neck, and that he turned on the threshold, to kiss her a second time.

She had good reason to remember that caress. It was the last that ever passed between those two—the last that ever shall pass; unless lips may be laid on lips, in greetings beyond the grave.

Brian's conduct was heartless enough, in all conscience; but there is just this much to be said in his favour. He did not contemplate a permanent separation, or even a very long absence from home. The fact was, that he had never fully realised the objections to his intended alliance; this was partly his own fault, partly the design of others. It is true that, had he chosen to inquire, or even to listen, he would have heard much to the disadvantage, and very little to the credit of Standen *père*: but Bessie's connections had had the tact to keep themselves sedulously in the background, so as not to interfere with the effect of the prominent figure. On the very rare occasions when Brian had visited the damsel at her own home, the old man had always been absent. He hardly knew Kit Daventry by sight; though that astute individual knew *him*, as

well as he did the owner of the leading Derby favourite.

Therefore, you may understand, why Brian could not appreciate the motives, that would urge his gentle, indulgent mother to prolonged resistance. He thought that she would be seriously vexed at first, but would soon yield when she found his happiness irretrievably involved ; nor, at the very worst, could he conceive that she would hold any fault of his, unpardonable. It was so much better, that she should know nothing till all was comparatively settled ; if the first shock could once be got over, and Bessie allowed to present herself at Mote, her lover doubted not but that her charms would soon conquer both prejudice and scruples.

Thus he went forth on his unholy errand—if not with cheerful confidence, at least neither desponding nor gravely self-reproachful. And behind him, stride for stride, moved with his awful even pace, Time, the Avenger.

The post came in early at Mote. Mrs. Maske-lyne's correspondence was always brought to

her in bed, with that normal cup of tea, which braces most of our dames and damsels for the labours of the day. On the fourth morning after his departure came a letter from Brian: needless to say, that it was opened first of the pile.

The maid, who was busied in the room on some of the duties of her calling, was startled by a low gasping cry behind her. She turned, and found her mistress struggling for breath, with a terrible agony on her white face—physical, it seemed, as well as mental; for the hand that was free—the other crushed the letter—was pressed convulsively on her side.

But Mrs. Maskelyne did not faint, and soon recovered herself sufficiently to speak; though only in a weak whisper. The words were—

“Send to Warleigh at once, and beg Mr. Seyton to come to me.”

Then she told the maid, to put some sal-volatile within her reach, and to leave her. With all her gentleness and consideration, Mrs. Maske-

lyne's household never dreamt of questioning one of her commands ; so the woman went, albeit reluctantly and under protest. She was an old faithful servant : nevertheless it deserves to be recorded, to her credit, that she kept all surmises and misgivings to herself ; and, after dispatching the messenger, only confided to her fellows in the steward's room that " her mistress had had bad news that morning, and she hoped it had nothing to do with Mr Brian."

After a while Mrs. Maskelyne's bell rang. She went through her toilette quite quietly and composedly ; though she still looked very wan and weak, and her breath every now and then seemed to fail her. She even tried to eat some breakfast, which meal was always served in her boudoir when she was alone. Almost before this melancholy pretence was over, there was a sharp ring at the great bell ; and the poor lady felt a momentary relief, when Seyton's name was announced.

It was but six miles or so to Warleigh. Tom's hack was at the door when the messenger came ;

for the M. F. H. met far off that day. It took him three minutes to change his pink for a shooting-jacket, and to get to saddle; twenty more, at a stretching gallop, brought him to Mote. He guessed, right well, why he was sent for; the letter that Mrs. Maskelyne put into his hand, without speaking a word, did not greatly surprise, though it grieved and angered him bitterly.

It was a cold cruel letter; shameful for Brian to have penned, even if every word in it had been prompted by others. He was not good at epistles, to be sure; indeed his education had been decidedly desultory, depending more on his own very moderate zeal, than on the will of an obsequious tutor. Perhaps the unwonted attempt, to be earnest and impressive, gave him a sort of moral cramp: but old fools, as well as young ones—meaning to be solemn—are often simply formal.

The letter set forth the writer's passion for Miss Standen; his fears that it would not, at present, be sanctioned by her mother; his hopes

that she would soon accord her consent, ‘without which we can never be happy ;’ his intentions of absconding, accompanied by the fair object, ‘ who knows she can trust to my honour ;’ and his fixed resolve neither to present himself at Mote, nor to be brought back thither, unless the union were authorised and approved. A few common-places of excuse and regret, and—nothing more : no clue given to the retreat of the fugitives, and no address, beyond one—vague enough, surely, to shelter any criminals—Poste Restante, Paris. As to whether immediate marriage was contemplated or no, there was silence discreet and absolute.

No wonder that such a letter made Tom Seyton savage. Though, even then, he blamed others more than the unhappy boy, he felt for a brief space as he never thought to feel, towards George Maskelyne’s son. But—had he been thrice as angry—he would have kept back all bitterness, in pity to the stricken woman who sate there, waiting so anxiously for counsel, if not comfort.

“Mrs. Maskelyne,” he said, striking the paper sharply with his finger; “don’t vex yourself, now or hereafter, about the tone of that letter. I would swear Brian never wrote one word out of his own head. I can fancy how it was dictated.”

“You had some idea of this, then—and never told me?”

Those words were too gently spoken to sound upbraiding; but it was very, very long before Seyton forgot the piteous look, which gave them such a sad significance. All along, he had known that such a question must come: yet, fore-knowledge did not prevent his feeling painfully contrite and confused; the bold, open brow, that since childhood had never blenched before his own sex, was apt, you will remember—with less reason than now—to vail itself in the presence of womanhood.

“I did wrong, perhaps,” he answered, after a pause; “yet not so wrong, as you may think—not so wrong, I do hope, as to forbid your trusting me still. This is all I knew.”

Then, as briefly and simply as was possible, he told her—what you have heard already. It was not in Emily Maskelyne's nature to nourish resentment long, against any living creature; much less against a loyal friend, who could only have erred unwittingly. Before he had half done speaking, Seyton saw that she had forgiven him; as he ended, she took his hand in both her own, and touched it with her lips. Tom almost started—they were so deathly cold.

“ You meant kindly,” she said, “ as you always do. And speaking to me could have done but little good; it might only have made more bitterness between me and my poor boy. As it was, he did kiss me—he kissed me twice,—before he went. You will never quite give him up, I know that; my husband knew it too, or he would not have looked so happy when he died. But, oh! how *could* he leave such a heavy trust to me? I am neither good nor wise enough to bear it. I have known, all along, that, when the time of trial came—and it was sure to come—I should fail, miserably. Now, if I had only

my own strength to rely on, I think I should lose my head utterly. But I will try—indeed I will—to do my duty, if you will only help me. I will act just as you advise, without questioning; and neither write nor speak a word that you do not sanction. But you will not leave me to myself?"

All this while her thin white fingers never relaxed their clasp of the broad weather-stained hand; it seemed as if the mere physical support gave some small comfort. Yet that same hand shook sometimes like an aspen, as Seyton tried all the resources of his simple healing skill.

He pointed out to Mrs. Maskelyne that, as Brian had not broken out into overt rebellion, by avowing an intention of immediate matrimony, there was still a possibility of bringing him to reason. The Standen party were too cunning to precipitate matters; and would never advise absolute forfeiture of the great heritage. There was a chance of working on their cupidity, if all direct influences on Brian failed. But on one point Tom took his stand inflexibly: not the

faintest hope was to be held out that Mrs. Maskelyne would sanction the alliance, either now or hereafter; or that—if her veto were set at nought—she would refrain from exercising the powers reverting to her by her husband's will.

While they were yet speaking, there came another jangle at the ponderous hall-door bell. There was a curious uncertainty about that ring: it looked as if it had been begun timidly and dubiously, but finished off with a sort of nervous impatience. Tom, at least, guessed who the visitor was likely to be, before the card was brought in, which Mrs. Maskelyne passed over to him, without speaking, but with a startled look in her eyes.

Mr. James Standen

was engraved thereon, in letters, huge and ponderous enough to have represented a 'warm' city-name.

"Will you see him here?" Seyton asked; as if the interview was a matter-of-course.

Mrs. Maskelyne bowed her head in assent: in truth, she felt hardly equal to the physical

exertion, of moving to another and distant room, just then.

Tom had time to say—

“Pray let me speak for you ; and don’t interfere, however harsh or hard I may seem. You haven’t an idea of the sort of person with whom we have to deal.”

The last words were hardly uttered, when the visitor was announced.

CHAPTER XII.

A HEAVY FATHER.

MR. STANDEN, as was afore said, had once been a very personable specimen of the florid style. He had certainly, that day, made the most of the outward advantages that drink and advancing age, had left him. There was little to object to in his attire ; it bore traces of a sharp ride from Torrcaster ; but the well-polished boots gleamed through the mud-flecks, and the pale-drab Bedford cords fitted him, with artistic ease. There was not an inappropriate wrinkle in the snowy muslin folded round his massive throat ; even his gloves were neat, if workman-like : in fine, the whole 'get-up' was that of the heavy middle-aged sportsman ; and it was very creditably done. But some of the other accessories were rather a failure ; at the second glance, the travestie was

apparent. The bloated face, with its turgid veins; the watery eyes, blinking under heavy flaccid lids; the weak, pendulous upper lip; told of deep debauch over-night, and frequent morning 'refreshers'—of long vigils in heated billiard-rooms and crowded hells,—of anything, rather than honest hard work, under sun and storm.

Nor was the visitor's manner very prepossessing. The cleverest of his class *will* swagger, when they are at all nervous. That Mr. Standen was so, could not be disguised: indeed, as he glanced round the room on entering, he started palpably.

The fact was, though he had fully reckoned on being confronted with Seyton sooner or later, he never expected to find him at Mote.

There was nothing aggressive, or particularly imposing, in Tom's demeanour as he stood with his back to the fire, in the Briton's favourite colossal attitude. Nevertheless, it might have discouraged a bolder schemer than Jem Standen was, before drink had spoilt his nerve. If the

keen grey eyes were not warlike or defiant, they were watchful exceedingly ; the very *pose* of the square, upright figure—poised lightly, yet so solidly, on the sturdy lower limbs—betokened a man whom it would be difficult to delude or cajole, utterly impossible to bully ; moreover, the bluff sunburnt face, that, a few minutes ago, had been so pitiful and tender, was now—as Daventry had described it—‘ set like a flintstone.’

Mr. Standen was further embarrassed by doubts and misgivings, as to the style in which his salutation should be made. He had met Seyton often enough in the hunting-field and elsewhere to establish a sort of acquaintance ; yet he could not but remember that Tom—familiar, if not friendly, as a rule, with every class, from lord to labourer—had never favoured him with anything beyond a careless nod, or casual remark in passing. At first, he thought of offering his hand ; but drew it back again, just too late to dissemble the intention ; finally, he contented himself with a circular bow, addressed to the company in

general. Now, this sort of *congé* is rather a trial, even to an expert courtier entirely at his ease: judge of its effect when executed by poor Jem Standen.

His first remark, too, was wonderfully *naïf* and truthful.

“I wished to see Mrs. Maskelyne, alone.”

Seyton had a straightforward simplicity about him, which was sometimes more disconcerting than other men’s sarcasms.

“I’ve no doubt you did (there’s a chair close behind you, Mr. Standen); but Mrs. Maskelyne is not equal to such an interview, just now. She wishes me, not only to be present, but to speak for her. Is it not so?”

She assented in a voice that hardly faltered at all. During the last few minutes, there had come to the unhappy lady a certain feverish access of strength; springing from the very extremity of her disgust and despair. She had asked herself the question—“Shall such a creature as that, ever show himself at Mote as the father of its mistress?” And she had answered—resolutely

enough, for the nonce—"Never; while I can stir hand to prevent it."

Standen sat down on the proffered chair, very readily; but, for some seconds, he kept tapping his boot with his riding-whip, as if uncertain how to begin: he was evidently still ill at ease. Ever since the hall doors swung to behind him, he had felt an oppression of moral breathing, answering to the physical sensations of such as climb unwonted heights: the social atmosphere was, by many degrees, too rarefied. At last, he cleared his throat and spoke; addressing himself, perforce, to Seyton.

"I presume, you know upon what business I have come here?"

"Partly so, but not entirely," Tom replied. "It must refer to yonder precious composition, of course" (he pointed contemptuously to the letter, lying open where he had cast it on a table near); "but we don't know, whether we are to suppose, you are acquainted with its contents. We don't know, either, whether you come solely on your own account, or as an ambassador from others."

His antagonist was prepared for him here ; and came to the parry and riposte with commendable promptitude : that look of injured dignity had probably been practised, more than once before.

“ I consider such doubts an insult,” he said flushing angrily (those sanguine cheeks were always apt enough at that sign of emotion) ; “ I have not the faintest idea of the contents of that letter, which, I presume, is written by Mr. Brian Maskelyne. And, as to others, I know no more of their movements or intentions than you do,—if so much.”

“ Don’t excite yourself,” Tom retorted, coolly and carelessly ; “ there’s not the smallest occasion for heroics. This is neither the time nor place for insults ; and such things are in singularly bad taste, when a mere matter of business is being discussed. It was necessary to know on what grounds we started—that’s all. As you come, then, solely, on your own business, perhaps you’ll be good enough to state it, as concisely as possible.”

“ Whatever you do — keep cool.” So spake

Kit the Lawyer, that very morning ; after refusing to allow his uncle a second stirrup-cup. The warning had been ringing in Jem Standen's ears ever since ; but he well-nigh forgot it now. There was something in Seyton's tone and manner—though both were quiet to a degree—that sorely galled even the case-hardened sensibilities of the drunken, shameless old turfite. He ground his teeth hard ; and, so, just managed to drive back the coarse, passionate words that must have broken off negotiations at once ; but he answered, almost in a growl.

“ My business is simple enough. I was away from home all yesterday, and only got back by the early train this morning. My daughter had disappeared : she had gone out early in the evening, and had not been heard of since. She had left this note for me ; you can see it, if you like ; it tells little that you don't know already, I daresay. I wish to be informed, what are Mrs. Maskelyne's feelings on the subject ; and what are her intentions with regard to her son ? That's only natural, I think.”

Tom waved back the proffered document with a gesture of rather exaggerated politeness.

“Thanks. I don’t fancy the reading of Miss Standen’s confession would help us much. It is probably nearly a counterpart of the one before us. So you were away all yesterday, and all last night? That was very unlucky. And you can give us no clue to their retreat; nor even to the route they would take, if they went beyond Paris? More unlucky still. But such things will happen. You think it natural that you should inquire into Mrs. Maskelyne’s feelings and intentions? I regret that I can’t quite agree with you. It strikes me, that, with her feelings, you have no concern whatever; any more than you have with mine. As to her intentions—I’ll try and make them clear to you. I believe I understand them thoroughly.”

The other lifted his head, that had sunk nearly to his breast, and glared up once at the speaker, with his sullen, bloodshot eyes. On this scant encouragement, Tom went on—placidly as ever.

“ You are here on your own account; that’s understood. Nevertheless, I must give you just the same answer, as will be sent to Brian Maskelyne. He says, in his letter, that he will never return to Mote, unless with Miss Standen as his accepted wife. Then—he will never return at all. I don’t wish to be offensive; but plain-speaking is necessary. We decline the alliance, absolutely and unconditionally. Wait; it will save time, if you hear me out. I need not go into the objections; it might not be pleasant for you to hear them all; but they are insurmountable, now and for ever. I say ‘we;’ because Mrs. Maskelyne has promised to be guided by me in this matter; and, further, if anything were to happen to her, I and the other trustees would stand in her position towards Brian, with less discretionary powers. The penal clauses of the will are very stringent and clear, as I daresay you know. We are prepared to put every one of them in force, sooner than countenance or condone such a marriage as this.”

Standen broke in here ; speaking hurriedly and hoarsely.

“ But he must marry her—else what will become of my child’s good name ? Do you suppose that is worth nothing ? Or that she is not as dear to me, as yonder boy can be to his mother—let alone yourself, who have chosen to interfere ? We’ll have justice if there’s law in England, in spite of you.”

“ Pardon me,” Tom retorted. “ I don’t see the ‘ must ’ at all. I wouldn’t talk too much about ‘ law ’ either, if I were you : the Law, as far as I remember, isn’t fond of holding minors to matrimonial bargains. I don’t intend to dispute the value of your daughter’s fair fame ; or your fatherly affection either. I only wonder, it did not teach you to look more sharply after her proceedings. It’s imprudent—to say the least of it—to allow girls to keep assignations in the dusk ; as I happen to know *she* did. You didn’t hear of it—of course ? But perhaps, you have heard of the proverb, concerning the worst sort of blindness.”

The other rose up—his face all a-flame. In truth, Seyton's tone of late, had grown unendurably provocative: he was not aware of it; and indeed, was rather priding himself, inwardly, on his diplomatic calmness; but, momentarily, he was more and more overmastered by wrath, and loathing, and scorn.

“ Do you stand there, and tell me coolly, that my child is to live and die a harlot, (he used a coarser term) because she's not good enough to satisfy your family pride? It's encouraging seduction: neither more nor less. And you call yourself a Christian and a gentleman? ”

It is probable, that the heat and passion of the man were neither assumed, nor attributable to mere greed of gain, or lust of power. He thought, no doubt, first and foremost, of the rich prize that seemed slipping from his daughter's grasp: but he may have thought too, with a pang of real remorse, of her honour, perilled—perchance, lost—in vain.

That furious outbreak quieted Tom Seyton, more effectually than any remonstrance could

have done ; for he was conscious of being, to some extent, accountable for it. He answered first, Mrs. Maskelyne's nervous glance of appeal : anything in the shape of violence was so utterly strange to her, that it was no wonder if she felt shocked and frightened.

“Pray forgive me ; if I had been more guarded, you would not have been exposed to this.”

His tone, as he went on speaking, brought Standen to his senses at once ; it was no longer contemptuous or insolent ; only, very grave and stern.

“We both seem to have forgotten in whose presence we are talking. There are great allowances to be made for your excitement, Mr. Standen ; but you must not say one other word in that tone—much less such words as you have used—if you wish to prolong the conversation. I confess, it seems to me needless and useless, to do so. I look upon seduction no more leniently than you do ; but I like to be sure that the term is not misapplied.

I'm not fond of advancing more than I can prove: so I say nothing more of Miss Standen than—this. From all I've seen and heard, I believe her to be as capable of taking care of herself, as any woman alive, of her age. And further—I believe that same age, to be a year or so in advance of Brian Maskelyne's. The case is good enough for my conscience, anyhow. I hope I shall never have a heavier sin on it than preventing this marriage, if it be possible; or of punishing it to the utmost, if it can't be prevented. You can force it on in spite of us—we know that. It will be quite legal in a few months' time. Only remember: you, and all it may concern, are fairly forewarned. They will have £1000 a year during Brian's life: at his death there will not be a shadow of provision for widow or child; unless he can afford to insure his life. You heard Mrs. Maskelyne say, at the beginning of this interview, that she wished me to speak no less for her, than for myself. I speak for both, now. If Brian chooses to cast his birthright away, and you choose to abet him

in his deed, you shall do so, at least, wilfully and wittingly. Upon one shilling beyond what I have named, neither you nor he need reckon."

Though Seyton spoke with a solemn firmness, that carried conviction even to the base suspicious nature he addressed, he felt exceedingly nervous—if truth must be told—as he withdrew his keen steadfast eyes from Standen ; and turned them—half-inquiringly, half-warningly—on Mrs. Maskelyne. He feared that the trial would prove too strong for the unhappy mother's resolve ; and that, by voice or gesture, she would strive to soften down the harshness of his own concluding words. But the lady's face was bowed down in her clasped hands : though the wan fingers quivered visibly, they veiled effectually all sign of weakness, from friend or foe.

Jem Standen was fairly penned. Rehearsing these things (or as much as he dared confess), in the sad sobriety of next morning, to his discontented nephew—he thus, in the metaphorical ‘milling’ tongue, described his own sensations.

“ It's devilish easy work for backers, Kit ;

they've only got to sit comfortably on the straw, and tell their man to 'go in and win.' He's a d—d awkward customer—is Seyton: I never meant to tackle him, alone; you know that. I tell you, I was over-matched from first to last: I did no good at out-fighting; and I did worse still, when I tried to close. Curse him! He was as cool as a cucumber, while I was hitting wild. I was getting groggier every minute; he'd have bored me down on the ropes in no time, if I hadn't got away."

Under the circumstances, 'getting away' was perhaps the wisest thing Jem Standen could do. He stood silent, for a brief space, after Seyton had finished speaking: and then said slowly—

"Is that your last word?"

"The very last:" Tom answered; "at least—here. I've two or three more to say, that it may be for your advantage to listen to; but that you can decide for yourself: I don't insist on your attention. I'll show you the short way to the stables, if Mrs. Maskelyne will allow me. I suppose your horse was taken there."

He stooped and whispered a few syllables of encouragement in the poor lady's ear, as he passed ; and then walked to the door, just as composedly, as if he were marshalling out an ordinary visitor. The other man followed, with a sort of sulky, helpless acquiescence ; very much like a bear who has just returned to obedience, after breaking collar and chain. But on the threshold he turned, and glared at the quiet figure—still motionless in its stricken attitude—with a bitter spite on his inflamed face.

“ You'll wish me back again, one of these fine days, my lady ”—he said, in a gruff whisper ; so low, that Seyton, in the corridor without, did not catch the words.

It is doubtful if Mrs. Maskelyne heard them aright : she started slightly, like one who hears suddenly, some harsh or disagreeable sound ; but she never raised her head, or seemed otherwise to heed.

So,—with even less ceremony and dignity than had attended his entrance—Mr. Standen went

forth, for ever, from the presence of the mistress of Mote.

Seyton spoke never a word, till they had passed through a maze of stone passages leading to a postern door, and so out into an alley of laurels, the further extremity of which abutted on the stable-yard.

Then, he stopped short ; and accosted his companion abruptly. Once more, his tone had changed ; it was not marked by bitterness or sarcasm, nor even great earnestness, now ; there was rather in it, an easy familiarity, not especially flattering to the person addressed ; such as one might use, chaffering with a second-rate horse-dealer.

“Look here,”—he said. “We’ll drop all that humbug, about your not being privy to this affair from the very beginning. Now—it’s not the slightest use, your firing up : I only quarrel with men of my own station, and my own age : you can walk on if you don’t care to listen. You do care ? That’s well. After all, I don’t know that you are really to be blamed, for doing your best

for your own. That's hardly the point, though. You've not made much ground, so far; and, trust me, you never will. Wouldn't it be worth your while, to draw stakes? You needn't be afraid of naming a sum. Brian can do little himself, even if he would: but you shall be satisfied, if I have to mortgage Warleigh. My children will get it back one day—if I don't. The boy can never be of much use to you; and he's very dear to *us*? Won't you let him go free?"

His honest eyes did not seek to disguise their eagerness: but Jem Standen's met them, coolly and cunningly.

"Are you aware what you're doing?" he asked. "You're simply tempting me, to set a price on my daughter's virtue."

"Not a bit of it"—Tom retorted, in nowise disconcerted. "There's a limit to everything: I wouldn't do *that*, to save my own son—let alone another man's. Brian says in his letter, that 'she has trusted to his honour:' she was right enough in doing so, I'll swear. You know, as well as I do, that, while matters are in abeyance,

she would be as safe with him, as with her own brother, if she only holds true to herself. Anyhow, it is on these grounds, that I propose compromise to you—on your own terms—mind. And justice shall be done to Miss Standen—as far as our side can do it. I'll engage that, too. Do you understand me, at last ? ”

Once more, the old turfite looked full at the other—not a common trick with him, by-the-way —this time with a devilish malice on his sensual face, that a painter of Hell-Breughel's school might have studied.

“ Yes : I understand you, quite well,” he said ; dropping every syllable deliberately. “ I've listened to you, very patiently, you must own. Now, listen to me. You want to know what I'll take to draw stakes ? Well—more than you could pay, if you mortgaged Warleigh to the last acre, and Mote to the back of that. You're fond of your boy—are you ? So am I—so fond that I mean to keep him ; and make a man of him, before I've done. And you'll see that my child has justice done to her ? I'll see to that. She

shall hold up her head yet, higher than the best of all your stuck-up madams, when he has made her an honest woman : she shall——”

A volley of blasphemy rather spoilt the effect of a speech, that would otherwise, have been almost imposing : it was so bitterly in earnest.

In all phases of life you meet with strange anomalies and self-contradictions ; but oftenest, I think, in natures essentially base or criminal. Has it not been often quoted as a characteristic of turf-men, that they will forego almost a certainty of enormous gains in the future, simply because they *cannot* keep their hands off the crisp notes that once have fluttered before them ? Jem Standen was an ordinary specimen enough of the class ; not a whit more sagacious or resolute than his fellows ; a few thousands (and, here, it was question *not* of a few) would have been a perfect God-send, in the actual state of his finances : yet he was able to put the lure of immediate avarice aside, with a determined self-denial, worthy of the wisest, that ever have toiled on through hard privations, towards their appointed end.

True it is, that the astute adviser, on whom he had chiefly relied from the first, had strictly enjoined the negotiator, by no means to hearken to any present compromise whatsoever. But it is more than doubtful, if his soddened intellect, and weakened will, would have held fast to that counsel, in the moment of trial, had both not been backed up by the promptings of his temper —savage enough, like many other sluggish ones, when fairly roused. The temptation, of administering one straight-forward ‘facer’ to the adversary who had punished him so sharply, was *too* irresistible.

A ‘facer’ it undoubtedly was; such as, for a moment, morally to stagger stout Tom Seyton. After the first emotion of surprise had passed, his anger began to rise rapidly; more so, perhaps, than it had ever done in his cheery, easy-going life. Looking back on the events of that morning, with very mixed satisfaction—he always felt especially thankful that he was just able, then, to repress an outbreak of wrath. Had he vented it on such an object, Tom would never have shaken

off the after shame. As it was, he answered coolly enough, apparently ; but a taunt sprang forth, that at any other time he would have kept within his lips, if he had bitten them through.

“ Make her an honest woman ? Did you ever hear King James’s answer to his nurse, when she asked him to make a gentleman of her son ? He said : ‘ I’ll make him a baronet if ye will, Lucky ; but the Devil himself can’t make him a gentleman.’ There, you may apply that story at your leisure. I’ve done with you. Here’s your way.” He threw the door open near which they were standing, and shouted through it, to a groom in the stable-yard. “ They’ll bring you your horse directly. You’ll do your worst, of course ; but I don’t despair yet. Greater miracles have been wrought, than rescuing that unhappy boy out of such hands as yours. One word more : you’ll do wisely if you shift your quarters soon. Marlshire will be too hot to hold you after all this.”

After that Tom Seyton turned on his heel and walked slowly back into the house ; never heeding

the coarse laugh of defiance, with which the other answered those last words.

He spent some time with Mrs. Maskelyne ; doing his very best to cheer her, and to dissemble his own disquietude. Before he left, a letter was written to Brian, almost entirely at his dictation, —you may guess in what terms. They resolved to await the answer, before taking any steps to trace the fugitives. Strong coercive measures—in the event of their being discovered—even Seyton allowed, it would be unwise and unsafe to use ; for, if Brian were brought home, he could only be detained there during the remaining few months of his infancy ; once his own master—he would be only more set on taking his own way.

So, again Tom Seyton rode homeward through the twilight, bearing evil tidings to Warleigh.

At the meet at Rylstone that day, there had been many speculations as to the cause of his non-appearance ; but, in four-and-twenty hours, the news of Brian Maskelyne's folly had spread throughout the county ; and all wonder at Seyton's

absence ceased. The affair was the chief subject of cover-side talk for many a day after ; but no one thought of questioning Tom Seyton ; even the rough yeomen had tact enough to keep silence, or change the subject, if they happened to be discussing it when he drew near. For all men knew, how close was the old friendship subsisting between Mote and Warleigh ; and how nearly disgrace, lighting on one family, would of a surety, touch the other.

CHAPTER XIII.

IN HIDING.

IF Seyton was dissatisfied with the issue of the word-duel, it is certain, that his elderly adversary did not return to his own place in a very jubilant frame of mind ; indeed, as he rode soberly back towards Torreaster, his meditations were of the gloomiest.

The prospects of the joint-stock matrimonial company—such in truth it was—did not look very promising, so far : the risks swelled enormously, and the possible profits dwindled in like proportion, as Mr. Standen contemplated them. He began to be heartily sorry that he had let Bessie go. The house would seem very dreary without her ; he did not look forward with any satisfaction, to the society of his saturnine nephew ; guessing, tolerably well, what solace or

encouragement might be expected from him. Furthermore, though he had affected to laugh them to scorn, he knew better than to disregard Seyton's last words,—whether they were threat or warning. Torreaster would be no home for one, against whom the face of Marlshire's favourite squire should be set in enmity. It was a nuisance, too ; the place was central and convenient; and he had been very comfortable there, on the whole. The hoary old profligate—who had ceased, one would have thought, for many a year, to encumber himself with home sympathies —felt something like an honest pang at this last disturbance of his grimy Lares.

His nephew was abroad, when Mr. Standen reached home; and he took the precaution to recruit his energies and fortify himself against catechising, with a hurried dinner, and divers drains of extra strength. This was done so effectually, that when the Lawyer returned, he could but get very little out of his uncle, of a coherent or satisfactory nature. Mr. Standen was sullenly reticent, or obstinately obscure ;

and even made one or two absurd demonstrations of asserting his paternal dignity ; hinting, that what had passed was his concern and no one else's, &c., &c.

Kit Daventry kept his temper admirably—he always did, when there was nothing to gain by losing it—and listened quite patiently to the elder man's maunderings, intersprinkled with vague defiant curses (for Jem Standen, in the quarrelsome stage of drink, resembled the famous writer of Perth, who “*stude in ta middle of ta road, and swoor at lairge*”); till he had extracted nearly all the information he cared for at the moment.

This much was clear : all overtures of alliance had been positively rejected at Mote, without holding out the faintest prospect of relenting : but a heavy compromise had been offered, which the Torrcaster ambassador had indignantly declined. Seyton had acted throughout as the plenipotentiary of the other side ; and the negotiations had scarcely been carried on, or broken off, with strict diplomatic courtesy. On this last

point, indeed, Mr. Standen seemed disposed to be rather more communicative; priding himself, as it were, on the truculence that he ultimately displayed.

"He 'bested' me above a bit, at first, Kit; but I gave him as good as I got before I'd finished with him. You couldn't have done it better yourself—d—d if you could."

This he repeated more than once, with many drunken chuckles; and, indeed, was muttering words to the same effect, as he staggered off to his bed-chamber.

The Lawyer saw his respectable relative depart, with contemptuous unconcern; only sending after him one aspiration of very doubtful benevolence. Then he mixed a huge tumbler of his wonted strong mixture, and fell to musing: no man ever saw Kit Daventry intoxicated; but he was one of the steady, silent, solitary drinkers, whose meditations are seldom dry.

"Couldn't have done better, myself? Perhaps the old fool spoke truth, there. I'm not afraid of many men; but, somehow, I don't

seem to care about tackling Tom Seyton, with his blood up. And I'll pound it, it was up to-day. I'd have given something, though, to have seen that jolly face of his with a real storm on it. I can't think why I hate that chap so: perhaps I'll know before we die. Anyhow, I could have done no good, if I had been at Jem Standen's elbow: the father was bound to show himself alone, in that scene: it's not the poor cousin's turn to come on—just yet."

He laughed a low, soft laugh; that yet might have grated on the nerves of an indifferent listener: it was so infernally significant, both as to the past and the future. Then, the current of his musings turned abruptly into a channel, over which fell darker shadows.

"Suppose it were all to go wrong, after all? Perhaps it would have been best to take their money down, and have done with them. I wonder, how much they would stand? No sum was mentioned to-day, I'll swear; or he'd have blurred that out, at all events. It's not too late

now. We must see what the boy's name is worth, though, first ; and we'll put it through the mill, before he's a week older. He needn't grudge paying for such a pretty toy as Bessie—pretty enough for a prince, for that matter."

As he paused again, a dark savage look came over his face ; and his strong white teeth glittered above his lower lip, while they wrung it hard.

" I wonder how long he'll keep his promise ? Not long—if she tempts him as she *can* tempt. Curse—no, I hardly mean that ; perhaps she will be honest—in her own way."

He rose, and shook himself with an angry impatience.

" I don't know what's come over me to-night. I believe I should get jealous, if I went on maunding here : and that's a complaint I've never suffered from. I've been too poor and too busy, I suppose ! it's like the gout ; only rich old men ought to have it. I'll go down, and see if they've got a rubber at the Rooms. There won't be many more chances, here, of picking up money. We'll

have to clear out of this before long—that's certain."

You see, the astute Lawyer had already indorsed Tom Seyton's warning. He left Torr-caster himself on the morrow, and did not return. His uncle only staid long enough to dispose of his horses and furniture. Then, he too disappeared; going no one knew whither. It is only fair to relate that, if he left an indifferent reputation, he left no debts, large or small, behind him. Mrs. Maskelyne received a formal note; containing a London address, in case she should wish, at any future time, to write to Mr. Standen: that gentleman utterly declined to communicate with Seyton, verbally or by letter. The address was at a West-End hotel of rather indifferent repute,—‘to be called for.’ Then followed a long interval of silence and mystery; for from Brian never a word of answer came.

But to the chronicler all these things are clear. The rebel had not fled near so far, as he would have made his people to believe: he had chosen—or rather there was chosen for him—a safer

hiding-place than even Paris ; the safest perhaps in the civilised world—a large London suburb. It is not worth while to define the neighbourhood more particularly : a dreary uniformity pervades all those out-posts of brick and mortar, that, year by year, testify to fresh inroads of the mighty army of masons, on the ‘greenery’ beyond.

The aspect of such places is rather depressing to a stranger. I have known men get quite silent and moody, on their way to pigeon-slaughter at Hornsey Wood ; falling into gloomy speculations, as to what manner of people resided in the sombre villas, and how they contrived to exist there. But this especial neighbourhood is cheerful, and full of healthy excitement, compared to some others, farther to the East or South ; where the craftsman seems to have exhausted his cunning, in producing a melancholy monotony of architecture. Only one thing on earth, I think, can beat them in this line—the long straggling street of an Irish village, built entirely of limestone, seen on a real ‘soft’ Irish day.

In a Terrace, such as I have described, did

Brian Maskelyne take up his quarters—uncomplainingly, if not contentedly. He was not under the same roof with his betrothed. She dwelt close by; under the protection of a convenient aunt, who had turned up, just at the crisis when a *chaperon* was indispensable. Thither Brian had brought her, with all honour and honesty, straight from her father's house. He spent most of his own time with Bessie, as a matter of course; but he had never once attempted to claim a single privilege, beyond such as are universally permitted to avowed affiance. He showed infinite tact, in glossing over, or ignoring, the blunders of speech or manner to which the aunt was unfortunately liable; and sometimes perhaps he rather puzzled the worthy dame with his punctilious courtesy.

“I can't make out, whether he's chaffing, or not”—she observed, once, rather sulkily.

To which the niece made answer, with a sort of disdainful impatience—

“Chaffing? He don't know the meaning of the word.”

If all the world had witnessed their proceedings, Maskelyne could not have been more careful to avoid any imprudence that might compromise the fair fame of his intended bride. Kit Daventry allowed that much, when he had once seen them together; and, thenceforward, was careful to abstain from the ancient cousinly familiarity—at least in Brian's presence. Furthermore—the poor boy forced himself to take Bessie's connections as he found them; meeting them always cordially, or, at the least, courteously. But it was piteous, sometimes, to see the struggle, with which he would repress an involuntary start or shudder: for never a day passed, that did not bring some fresh shock to the instincts—prejudices, if you will—inherent in his pure proud blood.

The hardest work of all was to be consistently civil to Kit Daventry. Even when the latter meant to be most conciliating, Brian hated the crafty handsome face from the bottom of his soul; and almost preferred the sneering insolence, and affectation of superior worldly wisdom, that the other cared not always to conceal.

Mr. Standen had introduced his nephew to his intended son-in-law, as the man of all others 'able to work the wires.' By which allegorical expression, he wished the latter to understand, that the lawyer was the properest person to put him in the way of procuring supplies that were urgently needed. To do Standen justice—he had never, from the first, disguised his own straitened and precarious means: so, Brian was neither very much shocked nor surprised, when Daventry suggested an immediate interview with a certain money-lending celebrity.

'Money-lending' is hardly the right word to use; for Mr. Hart professed to have no personal interest in any of these transactions, beyond acting as middleman between the borrower and the capitalist. People took this profession—like many other assertions proceeding from the same quarter—with many grains of salt; but it was no one's interest to contradict—much less disprove—it.

CHAPTER XIV.

AD LEONES.

LATE in the twilight of a foggy winter's day, Maskelyne and Daventry got out of a close cab at the quietest corner of the secluded street in which Mr. Hart's modest offices were placed. When the noiseless door swung open by some invisible agency, the latter led the way in, with the assurance of one treading on familiar ground: of a truth, Kit had passed through that dim passage pretty often; though never, in such good company as now.

They found the famous attorney, alone in his sanctum. So famous indeed was David Hart, and eminent in his peculiar line, that he well deserves brief biographical notice.

Of his origin or birth-place, absolutely nothing was known: taciturn on all subjects—he was

unusually so with regard to his own early history ; the most that was ever extracted from him being a vague admission that “his father had been unfortunate” ; from which the more charitable inferred, that the said senior had been the hero of an extraordinarily fraudulent bankruptcy ; while others affirmed that, under another name, he had incurred and endured the extremest penalties of the law.

However, David Hart’s first appearance in the world was made some score of years ago, as an attorney in a very small way of business ; so small indeed, that he could afford to attend the principal race-meetings pretty regularly, without seriously neglecting the interests of his clients. It soon began to be noised abroad among the lesser fry of ring-men (not nearly so numerous then, as now), that, if any one wanted a modest temporary advance, on moderate security, and didn’t mind paying for it, David was a pretty safe draw. From the very first, with an apparent rashness of confidence, he showed a supernatural sagacity in avoiding bad debts ; like an

old fox, he would pass by the daintiest bait, that had the taint of the trap about it. He would advance a hundred where no one else would have ventured ten; and, again, would refuse accommodation where everything seemed to promise fairly: in either case, it almost invariably turned out, that the caprice had sound reason at the bottom of it.

Before long, he made professional acquaintance with two or three wildlings of gentle birth, who could no longer afford to be fastidious in choosing their company; but roughed it, as best they could, in the tatters of smirched purple raiment. Thenceforward, it was easy to extend and elevate his connection; till now, there was scarcely a great house in England, concerning which David Hart could not have told tales—some, ‘too strange not to be true.’ At least, so he himself averred; and, though the man was on occasions a measureless liar, he seldom indulged in purposeless or vain-glorious falsehood.

He had been employed, no doubt, in more delicate commissions, than the mere raising of

moneys on usury. When things had come to so hopeless a pass, that regular practitioners would have nought to do with them, people said—"Go to Davy Hart"—very much as they might have advised a friend in mortal sickness, to try some kill-or-cure quack medicines, when all the resources of allopathy had been tried in vain. Truth to say, the remedy—even if successful—was often nearly as fatal to the patient's constitution, as the disease could have been.

If the class of Mr. Hart's clients had improved, socially speaking, the character of his transactions remained much the same; no really good or reputable thing ever came out of the office of that legal Nazarene. Indeed, to such he did not aspire: he had cast his lines too long in troubled waters, to care for anchoring in quiet land-locked inlets, where there was safe holding-ground; he knew, well enough, that the heaviest fish and the greediest to boot, are taken in the ruffle of tumbling tide-ways.

But of business—such as it was—he always had his hands full. After the great race-meet-

ings, his day was scarcely long enough to give audience to all the unlucky backers, who had been 'plunging' to such fatal purpose, that they were fain to seek David's aid before encountering Black Monday at the Corner. The borrower was always sure of one of two things—a point-blank refusal, or the cash down; and the amount—so long as there was security to bear it—signified nothing. For, putting Mr. Hart's own resources entirely aside, there was at his back a knot of Hebrew capitalists (he had married late in life a wealthy daughter of the tribes), who could have taken up a Foreign Loan, among them, had they been so minded.

The outward appearance of the man was rather significant of his character. A short sturdy figure; with broad brawny shoulders, and a strong bull-neck, on which was set a square solid head, fringed with crisp grizzled hair: the face would have been common-place enough, if it had not been for a pair of deep-set black eyes, remorselessly keen, and lips, braced and rigid. He had none of the unctuous civility, affected by

many of his fellows, so disagreeably suggestive of deglutition; both voice and manner were brief and brusque, almost to rudeness.

At the first glance, a stranger felt that he had to deal with a person of no ordinary resolution. In truth it was so: there never breathed a more thoroughly dauntless man, than David Hart. Endowed by nature with very firm nerves, he had acquired a large stock of the most useful—if not the most heroic—sort of courage; the courage of *Empeiria*. Nor was this wonderful; for, in his time, he had stood face to face, with almost every phase of human desperation.

The offices too, had a character of their own. In the outer room sate one or two sharp-looking clerks of rather tender years; who never seemed to do anything but take copies of correspondence, and go on hurried messages. The inner chamber, wherein Mr. Hart received his clients, resembled a luxurious smoking-room rather than the solemn sanctum of a solicitor; the furniture was rich and massive, and the arm-chairs models in

their way. There were hardly any law-books visible; but on a side table reposed the very latest editions of the works of the ingenious Sir Bernard; and not one of these crimson volumes had time to grow dusty from disuse. No piles of japanned deed-boxes lined the walls. Mr. Hart knew better, than to make a show with such ill-omened properties: the least imaginative stranger would have found in them a ghastly significance; such as would attach to things of price, adorning the cottage of reputed "wreckers." For, if in that office you had lighted on any muniments, you might have safely sworn, that over the heads of their ancient owners deep waters had closed, long ago.

Indeed sometimes, it seemed as if David took a cynical pleasure, in making the line of demarcation between himself and the old-fashioned family solicitors, as palpable as possible; he never disregarded etiquette more audaciously, than when confronted, in his own chambers, with these worthy men. There he would sit; rolling out volumes of smoke from an enormous cigar

(he smoked incessantly, the rarest tobacco that money could buy) till his respectable *confrère*—what with physical asphyxia, and professional horror—would hardly be able to whisper faint remonstrances.

Mr. Hart rose, slowly and indifferently, when his visitors entered; meeting them with very scant ceremony; indeed, to Daventry he only vouchsafed the coolest nod; while he indicated a chair to his companion, with the hand that still held the unextinguished cigar.

“It’s rather late, Mr. Maskelyne,” he said, “and I have no time to spare. Kit Daventry has partly explained your business to me; but I should prefer hearing it from yourself. My first questions are always the same. How much do you want? For how long do you want it? What is the nature of your security?”

The harsh hard voice, with a decided coarseness of accent, jarred unpleasantly on Brian’s sensitive ear. But for the questions themselves he was well prepared; and answered them, as clearly and concisely as he could.

Mr. Hart nodded his head twice or thrice, to show that he comprehended, and made a few brief pencil notes; his own face seldom told tales; but perhaps it was, just now, a trifle more discouraging than usual. He seemed to ruminant, for more than a minute after the other had finished speaking; bending his brows, and growling to himself under his breath, as was his custom.

“The security is queer,”—he said at last,—“devilish queer; there’s no getting out of that. It may be worth a hundred thousand; and it mayn’t be worth a two-shilling stamp. I don’t care so much for your being under age, Mr. Maskelyne. I’m much mistaken if you’re one of the sort that plead infancy and put their backer in the hole; (we must have another name, of course—if it’s only Kit Daventry’s there.) Compliments are not in my line; so you may take that, for what it’s worth. I haven’t seen the will yet; but I’ve no doubt you’ve stated it correctly. You can’t wonder, that the matrimonial clause staggers me. Boys will be boys—I don’t wish

to be impertinent—and you've only to run dead counter to your mother, to be comparatively beggared: for a life interest in £1000 a year is hardly enough to carry what you ask for—with the insurance and our interest. I'm quite frank with you, you see. You expect to pay well for accommodation, of course ; you would never have come here, instead of going to your family solicitor, if you had not had your reasons."

Maskelyne bowed his head in assent, and seemed to reflect in his turn. Suddenly, he looked up and spoke, too rapidly for any one to interrupt him ; that some one would have tried to do so, is most certain, had Daventry guessed what was to follow.

"I don't want to take your money under false pretences. I do intend to marry, and I have no hope, at present, of gaining my mother's consent ; indeed, she has refused it already. So the penal clause will come into effect, if she chooses to carry it out. I do not think she will choose ; but that is only my opinion. Now you know all the risks, you can decide if the affair will suit you."

The proud, dauntless look on the fair young face, became it well. Mr. Hart's lip curled, somewhat less cynically than was its wont ; but he appreciated yet more keenly—he had a grim humour of his own — the expression of Kit Daventry's. For once, the crafty schemer could not control his countenance ; surprise, alarm, and vexation were written there, in characters that a child might have read aright. There was little of the heroic type about the famous David, certainly ; but, at that moment, his feelings were not unlike those of the Lord of Luna, when—

He smiled on those bold Romans,
A smile serene and high ;
He looked on the flinching Tuscan,
And scorn was in his eye.

“ You're frank, at all events, Mr. Maskelyne,” he said. “ It's best, perhaps, always to tell the truth to your lawyer and your doctor. I wish I could get all the world to think so. You shan't lose by it, now. I'll deal with you, neither worse nor better, than I should have done if you had kept back that confession ; if Kit Daventry tells

you otherwise, don't you believe him. But, you see, you'll be entirely at your mother's mercy, if you once take a step that can't be recalled. You know how far you can trust to it—I don't. Is she very fond of you ? ”

Mr. Hart put the question quite simply and naturally, like any other mere business inquiry ; but it brought a dark red flush of passion on Brian Maskelyne's brow, and a wrathful flame into his eyes. He was prepared to bear a good deal in the way of humiliation ; but not to hear his mother's love made a matter of discount and interest.

“ I shall give you no further information,” he said ; rising as he spoke. “ If it don't suit you to accommodate me, I'm only sorry to have taken up your time to no purpose ; and I'll wish you good evening at once.”

Mr. Hart saw that he had made a blunder ; but he was far from being disconcerted by such a trifle ; sensitive scruples were entirely out of his line ; he had no more innate delicacy than a wild boar, and nearly as tough a hide. Yet he

was not a bit inclined to resent the rebuff; indeed he laughed—quite good-naturedly for him—as he answered Brian.

“ You needn’t be so hasty, sir. Once more—I didn’t mean to be offensive. But one is obliged to be inquisitive, especially in such a risky affair as yours. I think I shall be able to manage it for you, if, as I said before, you’re prepared to pay our price. I must look carefully into the will, of course. If you’ll call here at the same hour the day after to-morrow I’ll give you a final answer; and the money—if we make a bargain—as soon as the insurance can be completed. And you might as well come, alone. I don’t fancy umpires when I’m dealing with my clients, young or old. I stand on no ceremony with Kit, you see: we know each other, pretty well.”

Mr. Hart certainly did not stand on ceremony with the worthy in question: he had not once, thus far, recognised his presence or existence, save by these conversational side-strokes—dropped in the careless, half-unconscious manner,

with which a man at his meal throws scraps to a hound at his feet.

But the Lawyer had his temper under admirable control; and never let it loose, when the luxury was likely to be expensive, as was the case, apparently, just now. He only pressed those wicked lips of his tight together; and shot one malign glance from under his thick black brows: then he said, with a hard, forced laugh:

“ Yes: we’re pretty old acquaintances—too old to quarrel, at all events. You’ve your own way of doing business, Davy; and I’m the last man to wish to interfere with it, or to meddle with what don’t concern me. Mr. Maskelyne will be just as safe in your hands, as if I were at his elbow.”

Somehow, Mr. Hart did not seem at all propitiated by the other’s evident wish to conciliate and concede.

“ I think so,” he said—very drily—answering only the last words; and turning abruptly from Daventry. “ Well, good night, Mr. Maskelyne:

I shall expect you, at the time I've named ; and I hope to have good news for you—if it's good news, to hear that you can buy money dear."

So Brian and his companion departed ; separating, as soon as they were fairly in the street, without exchanging a word relative to the interview just concluded. David Hart smoked on in silence for several minutes after he was left alone ; frowning and muttering, as if rather discontented with his private thoughts. And thus they ran :

"It isn't often I feel squeamish about a real good thing ; and this is one, I do believe—fishy as it looks. But if, refusing him the money, would get that pigeon out of Master Kit's hands, he shouldn't have a feather to flutter on, from me. It wouldn't though. There's more than pluck in those big eyes of his ; there's the determination to go to the Devil his own way—if ever I saw it. So, he may as well pay toll to me, as to any other pike-keeper on the road."

With that, Mr. Hart arose and went his way ;

first pitching his cigar into the grate, with a vehemence wholly disproportioned to the occasion.

If ever the memoirs of David the Great should be written (they would be much more amusing, and full of incident, than the last crack sensation novel), I trust that his biographer will touch, leniently and lightly, on the instance of weakness here recorded. It is the solitary one that—as far as the world knows—can be quoted against him ; and, doubtless, was afterwards amply atoned for, in other cases, by several gratuitous twists of the funeral screw.

When Maskelyne returned at the appointed time, Mr. Hart received him, not a whit more cordially than before. He merely said that the money was ready, if Brian chose to take it on the terms then laid before him. Indifferent and careless as the latter was in all financial matters, those same terms almost startled him ; but he made no remark, after reading them twice through, except one of simple assent.

Mr. Hart gazed at him, steadily and piercingly.

“Now, mark me,” he said in his harshest voice. “It’s just as well, you should understand fully, how things stand with you. In the first place, you cannot legally be bound by anything you sign now; it’s a mere debt of honour till you are of age; when, of course, you will complete the necessary deeds. That’s *our* risk; for the second name on your bill isn’t worth the stamp. If you eventually succeed to the Mote property, your present incumbrance will be cleared off like a cobweb; if you are cut down to the £1000 a year for life, you’ll be little better than a beggar. You will have to assign your life-interest to us, of course; and the residue, after paying interest and insurance-premiums, will hardly keep you in gloves, if you dress as you are accustomed to do. That’s *your* risk. Only, if matters come to the worst, don’t expect any leniency from us: you’re fully warned.”

Brian met the scrutiny without flinching: there was a shade of *hauteur* in the tone of his

reply ; but not a whit of anger. He had indeed a vague idea, that the other meant well, in his peculiar way.

“ I understand perfectly,” he said. “ I have to thank you for the trouble you have taken, in making everything clear. I’m fairly warned, as you say. I don’t complain of your terms now ; and I shall not complain, if circumstances should compel you to exact the last letter of your bond. Neither shall I forget, that you have trusted to my honour. We may consider the matter settled, then ? ”

“ Certainly : it will take nearly a week to complete the insurance ; but you can have money sooner, if you are much pressed for it. You had better sign these bills now ; and you can tell Daventry to call here, and write his name across them, early to-morrow. I understood, from the first, that secrecy is one of your chief objects ; and I have not even suggested your asking any friend of your own to join you.”

“ Yes,” Brian answered, more eagerly than he had spoken yet. “ It *is* very important that no

one connected with me should know of my being in town, just now. I'll do anything that is requisite; but I can't show myself, nor give my address, unless I know it is safe. Won't this make a difficulty about the insurance?"

The other laughed a short surly laugh; expressing confidence in his own powers, and pity for the innocence of his client.

"You may trust all that to me," he said. "It's part of our business to keep things dark, without asking why, or wherefore. The sharpest detective in England would get no clue, from any proceedings that *I* manage for you. There'll be no difficulty whatever about the insurance. The doctor can pass you here, if you like; and you can sign what's requisite here, too."

His rapid fingers kept pace with his tongue, all the while he was speaking; as he ended, he tossed over to Brian a cheque filled up to a large amount.

"That will serve you for the present, I dare-say. Take care of it; it's 'to bearer,' you see. Any one can get it cashed for you."

So, with few more words, they parted. But as Brian was leaving the room, Mr. Hart laid his hand on his arm, and said, as if a sudden thought had struck him.

“One moment, Mr. Maskelyne. I’m not your regular man of business; but, if I were, I wouldn’t charge you anything for the piece of advice I’m going to give you; especially, as it is hardly likely you’ll attend to it. I don’t ask you what you mean to do with all this money—a large sum, mind, for a man who can have few debts to speak of. But, it strikes me, you’ve got into a queer lot—a *very* queer lot—for one of your age and position to be mixed up with. *That’s* no concern of mine either, you’ll say. Perhaps not; nevertheless, I will advise you so far. In any affair whatever, that has to do with a woman, or a horse, do you back your own judgment, and act on your own impressions—rather than put yourself in Kit Daventry’s hands. I’m not going to explain myself; but you may tell him what I’ve said, if you like. There, I won’t detain you any longer.

Good night. You shall hear when you are wanted."

And he almost thrust Maskelyne through the open door.

Brian did not think it requisite to mention to the lawyer what he had heard. But he never quite forgot David Hart's warning; and had cause enough to remember it, afterwards.

CHAPTER XV.

THE WHITE FLAG.

SLOWLY and drearily the days crept on at Mote ; as days will do, heavy with hope deferred. The delicate beauty was dying fast out of Emily Maskelyne's wan face ; and in her soft eyes there came often the haggard look—half eager, half weary—common to all such as

Watch for steps that come not back.

Often, too, her brows would contract suddenly, as though from a spasm of physical pain ; and that significant gesture, the hand pressed quickly to the side, was terribly frequent now.

It was understood, as a matter of course, throughout the county, that ordinary visitors would not be acceptable at Mote. Only a very few intimate friends called from time to time ;

and to none of these did Mrs. Maskelyne ever unclose her lips, on the subject of her sorrow, save to Seyton and his wife. These two came, not seldom; though Tom always felt as nervous as a woman, before going into that presence, and utterly depressed, for hours after leaving it. Like most other men of his stamp, he was a very coward in front of a grief which he could not lighten. Tender and True have been coupled together, many a time and oft ere this, since the day of the Good Lord James.

At last, Seyton's stout resolves so far yielded, that he offered himself to go in search of Brian, and to ascertain how things really stood, if he could not prevail upon the latter to return. It was a sore temptation, evidently; yet Mrs. Maskelyne withheld it. She knew enough of her boy's wilful nature, to be sure that any overtures, short of the one main concession, would only embitter him in rebellion; and she had not yet come to the point of surrender; more than all, she mistrusted her own powers of resistance, if they should meet face to face.

But, soon, the restlessness that so constantly attends long bodily or mental pain began to possess her, unendurably. As Brian's twenty-first birthday drew near, his mother could no longer resist a morbid desire to find herself, on that day, anywhere rather than at Mote. Had they not, often and often, talked over together their simple programme of festivities ? And now what had it all come to ?

The old family doctor, who shook his grey head more dolorously with each visit, had more than once suggested complete change of air and scene, as a possible remedy, since all others seemed to fail. Suddenly, Mrs. Maskelyne took him at his word. She only tarried long enough to provide herself with a travelling companion—a niece, who had always been her favourite ; and then started for the south of France and Italy.

Seyton—whom she consulted, as a matter of course, before definitely fixing anything—confirmed her strongly in her intentions ; he, too, thought that anything would be better for the unhappy mother, than wearing her heart out

slowly amongst familiar objects, endowed, each with its own pang.

He strove very hard to speak the last words cheerily, as he leant over the door of the railway carriage in which Mrs. Maskelyne half reclined, —she was falling fast into the ways of a confirmed invalid.

“Don’t worry yourself, if it’s possible to help it, with looking for news. I promise faithfully, that you shall have them, good or bad, directly I have any to send. But besides that, Kate or I will write often ; and you shall answer, whenever it won’t tire you. Miss Devereux—I shall never believe in a young lady’s nursing again, if you don’t bring your aunt back to us, quite strong and well.”

But Tom’s stout manhood nearly broke down just then ; and his last “Good-bye” was barely intelligible ; for a dry knot in his throat was choking him painfully.

The popular squire of Warleigh, with his merry nod or smile ready for every acquaintance, high or low, was most unlike the moody horseman who

rode back through the streets of Torrcaster; speaking to none, and seldom lifting his bent head from his breast. The men who saw Tom Seyton's face that day, shook their heads afterwards more ominously than ever, when they blamed Brian Maskelyne's folly, and speculated as to his future fortunes.

There are memorials existing yet—telling how, in old time, pilgrims, to atone for some deadly sin, travelled from one far country to another; halting often, and, at every station, enacting some fresh refinement of penance. Without consciousness of guilt, and without intention of self-torture, poor Emily Maskelyne went on a scarcely less woful journey. Yet it could hardly have been chance that guided her; but rather one of those strange distempered fancies, that are among the saddest symptoms of mortal decay. What else could have made her follow, step by step, the track that she had passed over two-and-twenty years before, in the first blush of matronhood?

George Maskelyne, without being a pedant, was what our fathers used to call—an elegant

scholar. He delighted in teaching his fair wife the traditions—legendary or historical—that make many bare plots of classic soil not less holy to the antiquarian, than the ruins shadowed by Mount Palatine. He had a low, soft voice, especially pleasing to the loving ears that listened in those halcyon days. Very often the desolate woman—desolate both as wife and mother, now—heard it again, as she lingered over the ground they had trodden together.

And the features of each place were so wonderfully unchanged. When she halted by Trasimene, there was the same ghostly rustle and whisper in the reed-beds, that stirred them in the gloaming long ago, when those two stood by the dusky water; and George Maskelyne—warming with his subject, as men of peace will do when speaking of war—told the story of the Great Battle. How, in despite of omen and augury, the Consul led his legions to the onset, through the white shroud-like mist, that soon swallowed up standards and eagles; and how the darkling fight went on—no man heeding or staying his

hand—though the ground was rocking with the earthquake, that laid walled cities in ruin, and changed the very face of Nature ; till, at the last, Flaminius went down before the Insubrian's lance, and a hopeless struggle became desperate rout. There, was the very pass, through which the wild riders of Numidia came hurling into the press, from their ambush behind the shoulder of the hill ; trampling down the fugitives in the shallows, or spearing them as they drowned, till lake and morass were merged in one hideous crimson swamp.

So on—southward ever—till she saw once more the primæval olives on the verge of the Sorrentine plain : not a leaf seemed to have fallen from the grey gnarled boughs, since she last rested under them ; and heard that, under that same shadow, some of those who bore arms before Troy may have lain down to sleep.

But the sharpest pang of all came with the memory of the hopes and fears, that her husband had shared with herself, when—long before their journey was done—they knew that there was pro-

mise of an heir to Mote. Heaven had hearkened once—once only—to George Maskelyne's prayer; and his house was not left childless. Had it come to this—that his widow should think in her heart, that there might be crosses, heavier to bear than the curse of barrenness ?

No—many times, No. In the extremity of famine, the poor mother never forgot to be thankful for past years of plenty, when, from morning to evening, she feasted her eyes to their full, on the sight of her darling growing up in strength and beauty, like a stately palm.

Famine.

Alas ! the word was only too applicable, now. No other could express Emily Maskelyne's intense craving for the tender words and caresses, that had made up the one great delight of her quiet life. The night-season brought her no respite or rest ; for her brief troubled dreams were ever haunted with—

The touch of a vanished hand,
And the sound of a voice that was still.

There are separations harder to bear, than those

caused by one sheer sweep of the Death Angel's sword.

It was not wonderful, that the invalid's health did not improve on foreign travel, as physicians and friends had hoped. She herself, probably, nourished no such delusions, from first to last. But, as summer faded into autumn (they were then once more in the north of Italy), Mrs. Maskelyne grew weaker so perceptibly, that she resolved for many reasons to hasten her return. She saw her niece was getting more depressed and nervous, daily: and sharper and more frequent came the inward warnings, to delay the setting of her house in order no longer: moreover she was possessed by the instinctive longing —common to so many creatures besides man—the longing to die at home.

So it happened, that an October evening found Emily Maskelyne once more at Mote.

Almost her first words were to ask, if the Seytons were at Warleigh? When she heard that they were expected home from Scotland, at the end of the week, she seemed quite satisfied;

and rose the next morning in better spirits, than she had shown for some time past. Neither did the journey appear to have exhausted her, as much as might have been expected. Even Miss Devereux was obliged to acknowledge this; though she remonstrated against her aunt's imprudence, when the latter announced that she had telegraphed for the family-solicitor to come down from town, for a long business afternoon.

But gentle Emily Maskelyne could be as firm, sometimes, as the most repulsive of strong-minded women; when she said—" Margaret, darling—don't think that I will over-exert myself; but—it must be so—" the girl felt it would be cruel to argue further. The legal interview did not last so long as she had feared it would; though more than one instrument was executed, which certain of the household were called in to witness. It appeared that the telegram had told the solicitor enough, to enable him to bring all necessary papers with him.

But, when he had departed, and the two women were alone again together, a great dread overcame

Margaret Devereux,—looking on the change that those few hours had wrought in Mrs. Maskelyne's face. Yet, in this change, there was nothing ghastly or startling: what was expressed there, was hardly exhaustion; rather, a repose too intense to be natural—the solemn heart-calm, won only after long weary war.

Over that peace there falls ever an awful funereal shadow: it is such a one as broods in quiet churchyard nooks, where neither sun nor wind may wander—so thickly grow cypress and yews; if any light is cast thereon, it is a faint distant glimmer from the Light that may never be quenched, streaming through the half-opened doors of Heaven.

In answer to her niece's questions, Mrs. Maskelyne would only allow that "she was a little more tired than usual :" indeed she seemed to be in no pain, and was sleeping quietly when the doctor paid his evening visit. The old man sat by her side, waiting till she should wake; and his earnest eyes never moved from the sweet quiet face, till they grew hazy and dim. He had known

and loved that face for more than a score of years; and he knew—now, without a glimmer of doubt—that he had a duty before him that night, from which the strongest and wisest of men are apt to shrink: the speaking of a death-warrant.

That duty, though, he did perform, so soon as he was left alone with the invalid after her waking; he said afterwards that, in his long experience, he had never seen the shock fall, to all appearance, so lightly; that it was no surprise, was very evident. The only point on which Mrs. Maskelyne showed anxiety, was that of time: her eagerness was almost painful, as she asked, “if she might reckon at least on three or four days.”

In her peculiar case, it was very difficult to speak with certainty: it was one, too, on which further advice was absolutely useless; even if the invalid had not owned to a nervous dread of seeing any strange physician. So the old doctor was fain to give her such poor comfort, as he could hold out conscientiously. If no sudden

shock assailed the system, it was most probable that Mrs. Maskelyne would survive the fourth day. This seemed to pacify her, to some extent ; for it was the Seytons that she was so anxious to see, and they were expected home late on the following afternoon. More than once it was on the doctor's lips, to suggest that Brian Maskelyne should, if possible, be found ; but he refrained. He knew no more than others did, of the actual state of the estrangement ; and feared lest he might produce agitation that would be instantly fatal.

Neither was Miss Devereux wholly unprepared for the heavy tidings : and she bore up bravely. But the next day was intolerably long ; she was far more impatient for the evening that was to bring Seyton, than the invalid herself, who lay still, hardly speaking or moving : it seemed as if she was husbanding the last grains of life, with a set purpose.

The twilight was closing in, when suddenly Miss Devereux started up with an exclamation of joy ; the sound of rapid wheels had

come, so much sooner than she had reckoned on, that she forgot, for a moment, the doctor's caution. But the imprudence did not, apparently, do any harm. Mrs. Maskelyne looked up, with only a quiet satisfaction on her face; and said :

"The Seytons ! I am so very thankful. Will you ask *him* to come to me, first, alone ? Kate won't think I'm unkind, I know, darling. You will sit with her, won't you, till I send for you ? "

The groom from Warleigh had had the rare good sense to tell his master, at Torrcaster how urgently he was needed at Mote; so he and Kate had driven thither, straight from the station. With an intense relief and sense of reliance, Emily Maskelyne heard Seyton's step outside her door: those quick firm footfalls always seemed to bring with them comfort and courage.

Once more, in silence, their fingers were locked together ; and, once more, the weak wasted hand was the firmer of the twain. But Seyton spoke

first ; he had hardly opened his lips even to Kate, since he heard the evil news at Torrcaster ; and, now, his voice sounded hoarse and unsteady.

“ You never wrote one word of this : I might have come too late.”

She looked up at him, with the faint smile, that became so well the delicate beauty of her face.

“ Why should I have written — only to make you sorry, too soon ? And I knew you would come in time. But there is something worse, that you must forgive me—if you can. Let me tell you, while I am able ; though I feel strangely stronger, since your wheels awaked me.”

Emily Maskelyne’s simple confession was very soon over, in spite of the breathing that grew, every minute, more laboured and irregular. On the previous day she had executed two deeds. In the first, she gave her full consent to the marriage she had hitherto opposed ; in the second, she provided for the ceremony having been performed clandestinely ; and exer-

cised the powers thus accruing to her, by bequeathing everything, without reserve, to her son. There could not be a more complete or unconditional surrender; and Mrs. Maskelyne hardly tried to excuse it.

“I know I have been weak, and wicked too—” she said. “I have betrayed my poor husband’s trust; and deceived you. Ah, why did either of you trust me? Yet I did my best: I held out—indeed I did—till my heart was broken. I grew cowardly and false, when I felt that I must die soon. I could not die in peace—I could not lie quiet in my grave—if my own darling Brian thought I had dealt hardly by him—even if it was hard justice. I had rather it was so: I had rather that he—and you—and any that care—should know that his poor mother loved him, better than anything else in all the world—better than her own duty. But I could not have done this—and lived on to see, what I must have seen; and bear, what I must have borne. *That* would have killed me; and killed me in cruel pain. Now, I am

spared all this: it is best—far best—so. Only say that you forgive me; and that you will pray that George may forgive me, too?"

Her voice, for a brief space, had grown quite strong and firm in its passionate earnestness; but, as she finished speaking, it sank into a whisper so faint as to be barely audible; and she lay panting painfully for breath; hardly able to swallow the cordial, that Seyton held to her colourless lips.

Forgive?

The doubt need no more have troubled Emily Maskelyne, than it need have embittered the death-pang of any martyred saint.

Had she confessed a mortal sin, instead of a weakness that the Mother of God might have owned, Seyton could only have spoken such words of kindly comfort, as he tried to murmur then.

For her husband—his pardon be sure, was granted already. The hearts that were tender and pitiful here below, will scarce become austere and stern, when the mortal has put on im-

mortality: not among the spirits of just men made perfect, will hard measure be dealt to the frail ones of this earth, who—having borne their burden faithfully for awhile—sink under it at last. And, you will remember, this was no sacred trust, involving the welfare of a human soul; but only a prevision of pardonable family-pride. Perhaps, even so great a thing as the mere worldly honour of his house had, for many a year, been to George Maskelyne among the trifles, swept away like thistle-down by the first breath of Eternity.

“Don’t talk about forgiveness,” Seyton said, when he could speak plainly. “It is I who need to be forgiven, for having taxed your strength so cruelly. It is following my counsel, that has killed you. But I believed, we were acting for the best: God knows, I did.”

She took his hand, once more, into both her own.

“He does know it—good, true friend: He knows too how I thank and bless you in my heart. But, indeed it *is* best—so. I have something more to ask of you. Yes: I thought you

would guess it." He would have risen from his seat, if she had not held him fast. "There is no reason why my boy should not come to me—now. You will find him and bring him, if it is possible?"

All Seyton's prompt energy returned, directly there was anything to be *done*: he looked at his watch, as coolly as if there had been no question of life and death; and spoke with his usual brief decision.

"I shall catch the mail from Torrcaster, if I start in ten minutes from this time. I don't fear much difficulty in tracing Brian. Stan-den's address will be clue enough, if it is followed up sharply. I do think, you may reckon on seeing us here before noon to-morrow. Kate will stay with you of course, till I return: she would hardly let me come up alone, as it was."

Mrs. Maskelyne bent her head gratefully; but still her clasp was on his wrist: she had evidently not said all her say.

"Two or three words more—only two or three"

—she whispered. “ I hope and pray that I may be spared to kiss my own darling, and press your hand once more. But even if God should rule it otherwise, I shall go to him quite peacefully and quietly, if you will promise me one other thing. You promised it years ago ; but everything is so altered that nothing binds you now. In spite of all that has happened—that may happen—will you stand by Brian to the last ? I don’t ask you to countenance his marriage : I don’t ask you to bring Kate here ; or to come yourself, unless on urgent need. I do ask you—it is much I know—never quite to desert my poor boy. He cannot escape sorrow, I fear, if he escapes shame ; but he will only want your help the more. I have no near relations left : but I would rather trust Brian to you than to my own brother, if he were living still. Say you will do this : say it—so—with your hand in mine.”

Halting between each sentence—between each word, at last—her failing voice only just carried her through : but every syllable went as straight home to Seyton’s heart, as if it had been uttered

in the trumpet-tones of an Angel. On the bluff Saxon face there came a certain grave dignity—the dignity of strong sedate resolve :

“I will stand by Brian to the very last, that I will ; and help him to my very utmost, through good or evil report—be it ever so evil. He may choose to reject my help : but—when I forget to render it—may God forget me and mine.”

For a minute or more Emily Maskelyne lay quite still ; no intelligible sound escaped her lips, that moved incessantly as if in earnest speech ; but the eager tension of her features relaxed, as they settled into calm content—the foreshadowing, surely, of the peace that would be perfected soon.

After a few words more of no special import, Seyton went to fetch his wife. The brave little woman was the very person to be relied on, under such circumstances. For, though there were sorrow and sympathy enough at the bottom of her kindly heart, there was no fear of her breaking down. And—fond as she was of the Maskelynes—her friendship with the family was much more recent than that of her husband, and had

never been knit so closely. So, it was but natural, now, that she should be less strongly moved than he.

It was full time for Seyton to be starting. His farewell words to Emily Maskelyne, were very simple and brief: he had good reason to reckon on seeing her, at least once more; and he knew how important it was to spare her further agitation. His hand was on the door, when he heard her voice—quick and hurried, as though some nervous panic had smitten her suddenly—

“ You feel sure you will bring him back early to-morrow? Quite sure? ”

It was ill for Seyton’s after peace of mind, that he turned on the threshold to answer; for the dying woman’s eyes met him full, and they followed him for many a day. In that last look, there was an awful craving agony, yet not utterly hopeless; such as might be seen in the eyes of wrecked sailors, well nigh mad with thirst, when above the horizon mounts the small black cloud, from which—if there is mercy in Heaven—some drops of precious water may fall.

That brief backward glance did more to unman Seyton, than anything he had gone through yet. It was lucky the time was so pressing; for he could scarcely trust himself, to mutter a few words of encouragement: then he closed the door quickly, and sprang down the stairs. Even so, a man might flee from some haunted house, after meeting one of the fearful tenants face to face.

But his presence of mind came back, before he had gone a mile through the cool night air: and his plans were all made, before he reached Torrcaster. His own cattle were scarcely equal to another rapid journey; but he ordered post-horses to be kept saddled, so as to be ready to start at a moment's notice, on the arrival of the 'special' by which Tom proposed to return if his mission succeeded. There were no passengers that he knew by the up-train; and, so far, it was well: for he preferred his own meditations—gloomy as they were—to the torment of answering or evading enquiries.

CHAPTER XVI.

TOO LATE !

BETWEEN ten and eleven that night, Seyton drove up to the hotel, where Standen had said he was to be found. It was not one of the regular 'sporting houses' which always look busy, if they do not seem especially cheerful or inviting ; but, rather, one of those nondescript establishments to be found in certain West-end by-ways, about which hangs a dreary air of shabby gentility far more repulsive than the glaring vulgarity of other taverns. One fancies that the frequenters of such places, must resort thither—not for convivial purposes, or even for the ordinary pursuit of their calling—but to concoct some unusually deep robbery, or merciless 'milking.'

Seyton soon learnt that the man he sought had

not called at the hotel for some days. But there did not seem to be any mystery about his private abode, which was situated in the suburb above alluded to. Indeed, the landlord was disposed to be quite communicative on the subject.

“I’ve known the time, sir,” he remarked sagaciously, “when I’d have looked twice at my man, before giving Jem Standen’s address, at this hour of the evening. It looks as if he was wanted, rather particular. But he’s no call to keep dark now; and hasn’t had, for some months past. I never remember him so flush of money: he must have been in some rare good things lately. It’s pretty sticky of him—not to have put any one of his pals on.”

Almost before the other had done speaking, Seyton was in his hansom again, and driving rapidly to the address he had obtained: he found the house after some little trouble; for the geography of these settlements is still rather vaguely defined.

The door was opened by an ill-favoured servant enough; with a sullen atrabilious face, bloated

withal, and fishy eyes ; in his shabby black, and dingy white neck-tie, he looked something between, a mute out of place, and a debauched dissenting minister—a fine full ticket-of-leave flavour pervading all.

In answer to Seyton's enquiries, this personage stated that "his master was out, and he didn't know when he might be in ; but that Mr. Daventry was at home, if that would do as well." It appearing, that such was the case, he bade the visitor, rather surlily, "wait where he was ;" and, after taking the latter's name, disappeared through a swinging baize-door into the interior of the house.

It seemed as if the servant had acted overmuch on his own responsibility, in making the above admission ; for the half-muffled sound of sharp harsh words, ending in a bitter oath, reached Seyton's ears, as he waited. But ere long the Cerberus returned, more sulky than ever ; and growled out something that might be interpreted into—"Come this way, please."

During those few minutes, Tom had leisure to reflect on certain reports, relating to Kit Daven-

try, that had reached him since they last met in the street; for no personal acquaintance existed between them.

Rumour had not been kinder to Standen and his nephew, when they vanished from Torrcaster, than she is wont to be to better men, whose backs are fairly turned. It is not astonishing, that men of their peculiar stamp will make almost any sacrifices, to avoid being made the subject of public talk: they know, right well, that when the ball of gossip is once set going, it is impossible to say when it will stop; and the chance of a flash of light, falling on some secret corners of their past life, is as terrible to them, as the gleam of a dark-lantern might be, to a robber whose profession is avowed. This thought was in the Lawyer's mind when he said, in his soliloquy—“We'll have to clear out of this, before long.” He guessed, too, that he himself would be more roughly dealt with, by common report, than his uncle and confederate.

So indeed it turned out. Long ere this, Seyton had been made aware that there was not a more

shameless scoundrel living, than the man with whom he was now seeking an interview.

The room in which Kit Daventry gave audience was comfortable enough, at first sight: but, the new, costly furniture was beginning to look dirty and tarnished already: it was no wonder; for the atmosphere was laden with the close acrid fumes of stale smoke and strong liquors, so as to be nearly unendurable to healthy lungs.

The Lawyer's appearance and demeanour, that night, were by no means prepossessing. The anger, only half vented on the awkward servant, lingered still in his scowling eyes, and black lowering brows: the visit was evidently both unexpected and unwelcome; and this he did not take the trouble to disguise. He rose as Tom entered, bending his head with a surly civility (which was not acknowledged), and spoke abruptly; without going through the needless form of offering a chair.

“ May I ask what you wanted with my uncle ? If it's a mere matter of business, perhaps I can speak and act for him. I presume you would

not have come here on any other—after what passed between you when you met last. Indeed, I happen to know that Mr. Standen would not have seen you, if he had been at home. It was a mistake, that you were let in, at all."

The man's manner was coarsely offensive; but his tone was free from the slang vulgarity that usually characterized it; and all his coolunning could not conceal that he was, for some reason or another, very ill at ease.

"He *would* have seen me"—Seyton answered, very quietly. "But you will do just as well: for my business cannot be simpler. I want Brian Maskelyne's address, at once: I must see him without a minute's delay. It is a question of life and death."

The scowl on Daventry's face grew blacker, yet; and his teeth gleamed through his beard, as he almost snarled out his words:

"I thought as much: by — I did. So you think you're to ride rough-shod over us—I know some of what you said to Jem Standen, and guess more—and then come and find us ready at

your beck and call, to help you to your ends ? Brian Maskelyne's of age, and his own master. If he'd wanted to see you, he'd have told you so himself. But he's too much spirit for that. *He* won't be the first to give in." (Tom remembered afterwards, the raising of the voice just here ; and the furtive glance at the folding-doors that closed the farther end of the room.) " And you want his address ? My uncle would have given you the same answer, as I do.—I'll see you d—d first."

The rude ferocity of the speaker's manner, was so strangely at variance with his habitual sneering coolness, that a child would have guessed, he was blustering to keep up his failing courage. And there was some reason for this.

Do you remember one sentence in a certain soliloquy—

" I would have given something, to have seen that jolly face, with a real storm on it—? "

Kit Daventry had the opportunity of enjoying that spectacle now, gratuitously.

With all his kindness of heart and easy-going

ways, Tom Seyton was somewhat choleric by nature: he had not been in a quarrel, since he left school, more serious than a poaching fray; but he was no more likely to brook insult patiently, than the 'humane' King of Connemara. He thought, in his conscience, that Emily Maskelyne's death lay, chiefly, at the door of those who had beguiled away her son, and confirmed him in rebellion. The arch-schemer—as he had reason to believe—stood there now; insolent and defiant, as though conscious of the triumph, that was, in truth, already won. And this—when every second was priceless; and the briefest delay, a wrong done to her who lay yonder in her mortal agony. Then—keener than ever—rose the memory of the terrible look that, ever since he met it, had been driving Seyton onward, like a goad. His intentions and cause were good, certainly; but the savage devil that, for the moment, reigned in that honest breast, might have prompted the hand of Cain.

"Look here"—Tom said, speaking very low. "I haven't time to bandy words with you.

You'll give me that address within the minute, if you're wise. For I'll have it out of your throat—by fair means or foul."

As he spoke, he moved slowly nearer and nearer to the other—his own face transformed past recognition ; and with a fell meaning, in his eyes, before which a bolder villain than Daventry might have quailed.

But the Lawyer was a coward to the core of his knavish heart. He was much the taller, if not the more powerful man of the two ; and sparring had formed part of his education. Indeed, he was reckoned rather a dangerous customer, in those brief midnight broils, that are generally decided by the first blow or so : where neither pluck nor stamina find much room for display : that big diamond ring was worn, for use no less than ornament ; the sharp facets would cut a temple-vein as with a poniard stroke. But, on the present occasion, he seemed to put but small trust in the resources of 'science ;' and evidently preferred a non-combative policy. Help was very near, of course ; but this—if he remem-

bered it at all—did not embolden him to play the bullying out. Perhaps he felt, much as Wycliffe did, when quoth the grim buccaneer—

Might I not stab thee, ere one yell
Could rouse the distant sentinel ?

There is hardly a creature on earth so helpless, as a cool cunning man, fairly distraught with fear.

As Seyton drew nearer, Daventry put up his hands; but it was only to deprecate violence, and to entreat parley.

“Don’t—don’t—be so hasty”—he stammered; with a change of manner, that, under other circumstances, would have been irresistibly ludicrous. “I’ll give you the address, if—it’s really a question of life and death, you say.”

Tom was too earnestly intent on one object, to notice the miserable evasion—it could hardly be called self-deceit—with which the other strove to cloak the dastardy of a surrender at discretion. His own face was still very stern, but the fierce menace gradually faded from it, as he answered, in the same suppressed voice—

“ I said wrong : it is a question of death only. Brian cannot hope to see his mother alive, if he reaches Mote after noon to-morrow.”

What Daventry’s reply would have been—whether he would have attempted the lie of condolence, or allowed his sordid anxieties to appear—can never be known.

Before he could open his lips, the folding-leaves behind Seyton burst open with a rattle, and Brian Maskelyne stood there ; clutching the door-handle like a drunken man, as he swayed to and fro ; his great black eyes gleaming unnaturally ; his fair smooth cheeks blanched to a dead opaque whiteness.

By dint of pondering on the shame and sorrow, already wrought by the wretched boy’s wilful madness—to say nothing of what must surely come thereafter—Seyton had contrived, up to this moment, to keep his anger warm ; but, at that ghastly apparition, all resentment was swallowed up, in pity for the awful punishment that, he saw, had already begun. He entirely forgot the presence of a third person, as he .

turned to meet Brian, with outstretched hands, and a smothered exclamation of welcome.

But Maskelyne shrank back, repelling the other's advance, as if he himself were plague-stricken; and spoke to Daventry, with a horrible quavering laugh, that made Tom's blood run cold.

“ Didn't I tell you, it would be so ? It *has* killed her. But I've shown a proper pride—as you call it—and we shall have our own way, at last.”

A strong gripe was on his arm, before he could utter another word.

“ This is no time for reproaches ”—Seyton said—“ far less for reproaches, wasted on *him*. Surely you will come with me, this instant ? ”

Brian bent his head, and followed, submissively: in the door-way he turned, and looked back at Daventry, who still stood sullenly apart, in a bewildered helpless way.

“ You'll let Bessie know ”—he said. “ She'll guess why I could not tell her myself, or write one line—to-night.”

The next minute he was in the street, at Seyton's side.

The Lawyer drew a long breath, when they were fairly gone; and, turning to the table, filled a glass brim-full with brandy: his hand shook so, that he could scarcely carry the dram to his lips, unspilled.

“That's well over”—he muttered. “I didn't see my way out of it, five minutes ago. There's madness in that boy's blood, I do believe. And, as for the other—d—n him—I know, now, why I always hated him so. I'd sooner face a dozen roughs, than those infernal eyes of his, when the devil comes into them, as it did to-night; and I'd as soon trust my neck in a halter, as in his fingers, if he meant mischief.”

As he mused on, his brow began to clear; and the wicked, sneering smile, curled his lip once more.

“It looks very much as if the big *coup* were coming off, after all. It isn't likely, that the mother will die game: she wouldn't have sent for her pet, to tell him he was cut off with a

shilling. I wonder where that tipsy old fool has got to: he's later than usual; he won't be fit to talk to either, when he does come in. So I'll go down and tell Bess the news. Good Queen Bess! Here's her health; and *there's* for luck."

He pitched the empty glass into the grate, with that low *sournois* laugh, described before; and, without more ado, went forth into the night.

Brian only spoke once, on their way to the railway.

"Why was I not told of this, sooner?"

"I only knew it myself, six hours ago"—was the reply. Not another word passed between them, till they got out at the station.

It may be well to mention here, that Brian's presence in Standen's house that evening (which looks very like a stage-trick) was the most natural thing imaginable.

He was not yet a-weary of the beauty for which he had paid such a fearful price: but the most infatuated bridegroom—aided and abetted by a more sentimental companion than the fair Bessie—might own, before his happiness is two

moons old, that some slight distraction to the monotony of love-making, is not to be despised. Putting his wife aside (for wife she had been, these months past), poor Brian had not the chance of interchanging a single idea with a congenial spirit: he had never cared much for reading; and, in the *incognito* which for obvious reasons he was compelled to observe, amusement and employment were alike out of his reach. His dislike and contempt for Bessie's male relatives—for the cousin especially—had increased well-nigh to loathing. Nevertheless—from pure lack of something to occupy his thoughts, when not amatively engaged—he had interested himself in the turf-speculations of the pair. This especial night was the eve of a great race-meeting; and Brian had gone down to his father-in-law's house to settle, finally, how his money should go on: not finding the latter at home, he had remained to talk over matters with Daventry.

They had been warned at the terminus that a 'special' would probably be needed; so it was not as long as might have been expected, before all

was ready for a start. Whilst they were waiting, Seyton took some hasty refreshment—it was many hours since he had tasted food—and tried hard to make his companion follow his own example. Tom had a decided belief, as to the relation of the physical to the moral powers; and he guessed that both would soon be sorely tried. But Brian rejected everything but soda-water, which he drank eagerly, unmixed with spirit. Perhaps he was right: there was evidently fever in his veins already; for two round scarlet spots shone out on his white cheeks; and his hand was, by fits and starts, burning, or deadly cold.

Not long after midnight, they were plunging forwards through the dark, at the speed that can only be got out of a light-loaded engine, with the rails clear in front, for hours to come. And, still those two were very silent: yet, a few words Seyton forced himself to speak. He held it shame, that one stone of the wall, built up of late between Brian and his mother, should stand, while his hand could pluck it away. So, as briefly

as possible, he told how Emily Maskelyne had yielded every point in dispute ; and had forborne to visit, even with the lightest penalty, her son's fatal rebellion.

Not a gleam of triumph or satisfaction dawned on Brian's dreary face, as he listened. Only the big storm-drops, that had been gathering slowly under his long dark lashes, rolled down, one by one. But he made no answer ; and thenceforward to the journey's end, kept his eyes constantly closed—evidently not thinking of sleep, but to show that he wished to be left entirely to himself : this fancy the other was only too ready to indulge.

As Seyton studied his companion's visage more attentively, he felt surprised at himself, for not having noticed, at the first glance, how much it was changed. It was not its exceeding pallor which struck him so painfully ; for that was natural just now ; neither were the features unhealthily emaciated ; but Tom would rather have seen signs of past or present disease, than the weary care-worn look of premature age. Yet

it was not the thought of what Brian must have gone through, that made his old friend so sad ; rather, it was the certainty of what the future had in store. Ill fares it, surely, with him, who, in the battle of life, has a sore wound under his maiden harness, ere the onset is fairly sounded. No wonder that, while Seyton gazed on the work of the last few months, he should have remembered the gloomy text—

“ If they do these things in the green tree,
what shall be done in the dry ? ”

They were scarcely delayed five minutes, after reaching Torrcaster : the posters were standing ready saddled, close to the station ; and every one was on the alert. The cause of Seyton’s night journey had been noised abroad ; and there was not a true man in Marlshire, who would not have given his best horse to forward that errand. The driver had [his master’s orders, to spare neither whip-cord nor steel ; and carried them out with a will. The famous elms of Mote rose, gaunt and grey in the early dawn-light, as—still at a furious gallop—they swept through the open

lodge-gates, and up the main avenue ; caring nought if the thundering wheels gave warning to those within. What is prudence with the sick, is mockery with the dying ; and there is small need of caution, when hope is past.

As the swing of the carriage at the turn threw Seyton against his companion, he felt the other shiver as though in an ague-fit. There was nothing but pity in his heart, be sure, just then ; yet his voice sounded sharp and stern, as he pressed Brian's arm—

“You must command yourself—in mercy to *her*.”

The strong hand seemed to have a magnetic force of its own, for the other ceased to tremble ; and said, quite steadily, though in a whisper—

“ You may trust me.”

Before another word was spoken, the carriage drew up before the huge Norman arch that shadowed the entrance. Brian Maskelyne was at home, once more. .

Seyton sprang out first ; but—quickly as he moved—a stream of light poured through the opening door before he was fairly on the thres-

hold ; and Kate cast herself on his breast, as he came in.

He knew it all at once—knew that his journey had been utterly in vain ; for, in spite of his good speed, Death had travelled yet faster—knew, that he had not been able to lighten, by one whit, the remorseful burden that Brian Maskelyne must bear thenceforward for ever. He knew all this, before Kate could murmur through her tears—

“ Too late ! Too late ! ”

If those words—ominous at all times—fell on Seyton’s heart like drops of lead, how, think you, did it fare with that other close behind, who—clasping his hands over his writhen face, like a man stricken blind—staggered back into the outer dark, with a bitter wailing cry ?

This was what had happened at Mote that night.

For an hour or more after Seyton’s departure, Mrs. Maskelyne seemed to doze ; at least, she lay quite still, with closed eyes, breathing regularly. But she woke up, all at once, panting and scared, as though from some evil dream ; and

asked, eagerly, for the parish-priest, who lived hard by; indeed, the rectory stood within the park-wall. He was not long in coming; for all the evening through, he had been expecting the summons. By the time he arrived, Mrs. Maskelyne was quiet again; and, outwardly, was more composed than any one of the women who shared her last sacrament. But the valediction of the Church was scarcely spoken, when there came on a spasm of pain, more swift and terrible than any that had preceded it: before it ended, the least experienced of those present knew, that they were standing in the solemn fore-shadow of the Dark Valley.

At last the cruel throes that shook every fibre of the wasted frame, grew fainter and rarer; till, under the strong stimulants, Emily Maskelyne revived, enough to speak once again. She looked up at the doctor, who had held her in his arms all through the paroxysm, and said, quite distinctly—

“Then it is nearer than you thought—much nearer?”

“ You will suffer no more pain ”—the other answered in a hard constrained voice: he could frame nothing better than that brief indirect reply; for he had not been so unmanned, since he stood by his own daughter’s death-bed, many a year ago.

She drew herself free from his clasp, with a strength that surprised all who saw the effort; still gazing up into his eyes; but now, with a wild eagerness in her own.

“ I can bear pain—any pain—if I may only see Brian once more for a few minutes—a very few. Cannot you help me to this? I will take anything you give me. Ah, do, in pity, try.”

The doctor’s sturdy frame quivered like a willow-wand from head to heel, as he spoke, hoarse and low—

“ I believe, that no science could say more than this—It is as God wills. Yet it is hard, that you have only my poor skill to appeal to. I ought to have been more firm about calling in a better opinion.”

The gentle heart, that had never refused pitiful charity to any breathing creature, asserted itself even amidst the bitterness of death. Emily Maskelyne felt actually repentant, as she saw self-reproach on her old friend's honest face. She pressed his hand hard, as she sank back on her pillow.

"Do not say that; it makes me feel so ungrateful. No one could have done more for me; and I should not have been happy in any other hands. You said well—'It is as God wills.' I will try not to murmur any more. Let me rest now."

And so she lay for many minutes; never stirring lip or muscle; though sometimes they heard a sound like a smothered moan; and a tear or two, at long intervals, rolled from under her heavy eyelids. When she roused herself, she beckoned the women who were present to her side, one by one, and gave to each a farewell kiss. But she spoke never a word, till Kate's face was touching her own: then the slow, weak whisper came—

“Kiss my own boy, for me—my poor boy.
And tell your husband—I trust —”

Her voice died away in a long labouring breath; and no other intelligible syllable passed Emily Maskelyne’s lips, though they were moving often, as if in inward prayer. After this, Kate thought, she suffered no pain; and life departed in a faint fluttering struggle, like the agony of a wounded bird.

Does all this seem to you who read, unreal or improbable—the overwrought creation of a romancist in search of a sentimental episode?

Peradventure it may be so. Not being well up in cardiac physiology, I am scarcely prepared, at this moment, to prove that a ‘broken heart’ can slay so swiftly and surely, unaided by mortal organic disease. But if such a malady does exist, I do honestly believe, that the mothers who have sunk under it would outnumber—ay, ten to one—all the lovesick maidens that ever wore wreaths of willow.

END OF VOL. I.





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